A Study of Resonance

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Rating:	Mature
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Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Characters:	Percy Weasley, Severus Snape, Tom Riddle, Tom Riddle | Voldemort, Harry Potter, Moaning Myrtle, Nymphadora Tonks, Charlie Weasley, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, Ginny Weasley, Minerva McGonagall, Andromeda Black Tonks, Draco Malfoy, Narcissa Black Malfoy
Additional Tags:	Time Travel, Alternate Universe - Time Travel, this is very long, just a fair warning, percy is a Nerd so there are more discussions of magical theory than actual battles, Percy Weasley-centric, POV Percy Weasley, highlights include, morally ambiguous Death Eaters, a lot of Blacks in various roles, Percy's best attempts at political machinations, no actual character bashing though a lot of grumpy commentary by Percy at his wits end, moaning myrtle as the only one with any sense, magical portraiture, a Percy who gets worse before he gets better, there's a lot of Tom Riddle in this story, also a fair warning
Language:	English
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Collections:	The Best Fics I Have Had The Pleasure of Reading, Amaris' Harry Potter Favourite Super Duper Good Fics Ever, My favorite stories, my heart is here, just some incredible hp ff, Harry Potter | Bookshelf of Favourites | Rak, Lilranko Interesting Read List, 10 Estrellas ¡Favorito!, Esto es como un accidente automovilístico del que no puedes apartar la vista PERO ENTONCES UN AVIÓN ATERRIZA SOBRE TI, Collections, Lilranko Great Stories to Rediscover, Fics that temporarily fix all wrong in the world and hang the moon for me, Fics that made me stim, My personal collection of interesting stuff, Best Harry Potter Fics and fave stories from other fandoms, hp fics I would die for, krakengirl's top tier favs of all time, 💖 stories that give me serotonin 💖, Once Upon A Tale, PB100 I will revisit these over and over, you smell like love, Take it (to the Left) Now Y'all, The Yin-Yang of Beauty; The Raw and Refined Perfections
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A Study of Resonance

by mymovingfingerwrites

Summary

Percy Weasley is not particularly reckless, until he is, once, on the anniversary of his brother's death. For most people, the idea of sending oneself through time to correct one's mistake would remain a fantasy, something to dwell on in the middle of the night, but Percy has always been too capable for his own good.

Featuring: a reluctant spy, an unlikely friendship between a ghost and a lonely student, a portrait, very few friends, several very lengthy conversations about soul magic, and far too many Horcruxes.

(Or, an attempt to answer the question, if someone intelligent was sent back through time, armed only with the word 'Horcrux' and a general knowledge of the main timeline—not to mention a keen understanding of the Hogwarts curriculum—could that person logic his way to defeating the Dark Lord? Only time will tell).

COMPLETE.

Notes

I started writing this two years ago at the beginning of the pandemic, largely because I was home and bored and re-reading the Harry Potter series. I found that Percy just kept popping up, again and again...at the Burrow, sitting next to Harry in the Great Hall, at the Quidditch Cup, at the Yule Ball, and of course at the Ministry. If you think about it, Percy was very proximal to all of the important events of the series, though of course with a rather different view of everything.

At the same time, I've always wanted to write a time travel fic, but my problem with most time travel fics is that the person being sent back through time can't know too much. If you knew the location and identity of all of the Horcruxes, it would be trivial for an adult wizard to destroy them all, particularly if they traveled back early enough. But, if the character knows nothing (say, Luna), it's completely unlikely they'd ever get anywhere on the task, since without knowledge of the Horcruxes there's no way to destroy the Dark Lord. So I thought, who would be an interesting character to equip with that knowledge?

This story is very long, but it is complete, and I will be posting chapters weekly. The first few years I think I will post one per chapter. If these bore you, I ask you to skim and get to the good stuff. Percy has at four years of Hogwarts to get through before Harry even is old enough to be Sorted.

If they don’t bore you, I hope the story that unfolds will be complex, interesting, and surprising.

Either way, let me know. I’d love to chat. I'm on Tumblr with the same username.

ENDINGS & FOUNDATIONS

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BOOK ONE: STUDENT (HOGWARTS)

PROLOGUE: ENDINGS

May 2000 (Percy is 24; Harry is 19; the war has been over for two years)

There had been a time when Percy had longed for quiet, for solitude, for serenity. Seventeen years of life at the Burrow, his small room squashed between Charlie's and Ron's, mixed with eleven years boarding alongside four rowdy Gryffindor boys, and Percy rather believed, given the opportunity to look into the fabled Mirror of Erised, that he would see an immaculately cleaned study, three eagle quills lined up on his desk, clean parchment, and ink so smooth and expensive one merely had to think of a stroke for it to appear.

Now, barely two years after the war, Percy has his desk, and his quills, and his ink custom-made. Shacklebolt had kindly allowed him to keep his job—over the baying of the hounds, several of whom had been members of his own family—and Percy had plenty of money to spend on his futile attempts at achieving inner peace.

Now, barely two years after the war, his flat reverberates loudly with the silence of his own miserable, lonely existence. Now, barely two years after the war, Percy has nothing worth writing with his beautifully crafted quills. Now, barely two years after the war, Percy feels like his life has ended, because it has been two years since Fred died, and Percy cannot stop thinking about how it should have been him instead.

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People always say that grief fades, and Percy finds to his surprise that the trite saying is true.

The grief fades. Every day it becomes easier to breathe—or it would, if grief were the only emotion causing his chest to seize. Every night his nightmares fade—by now, he is used to them, and welcomes them as one may a friend whose words are harsh but necessary. On the first anniversary of Fred’s death, Percy hides in his apartment the entire day, too cowardly to face his family and George’s accusing eyes. But by the second anniversary, Percy does not battle with grief any longer.

What people do not say is that grief is but one emotion associated with death. Death cares not for grief; it is an emotion for the living. Regret, however, regret and sorrow and guilt—those are emotions that never fade. Percy wakes on the second anniversary of his brother’s death and feels hopelessly, angrily, *purposefully* like he has to do something before he explodes.

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He asks Harry, hating his cowardice. Ron sits in the other room with his weeping mother, steadily grasping George's hand. Who knew that Ron would become the stone on which the Weasley family leaned? Who would have predicted that he alone would be able to get George to say Fred's name, if only sparingly?

Harry eyes him for a long second. Percy notices Hermione noticing them both, even as she chats with Ginny and Bill from across the room. He has no doubt she would be there in a second if Harry seemed to need the reinforcement.

Watching Harry think, Percy is struck by how *young* he is, this hero not yet twenty. Part of him cannot help but wonder what Harry could possibly do now, in the epilogue to his life. Nineteen years old and his greatest value already realised, his place in the history books secured.

(That part of him cannot help but burn, a little, when he thinks about it. Nineteen years old and more than Percy will ever be, by chance of birth and prophecy and destiny).

"The prophecy said that either I or Tom would have to kill each other," Harry says, finally. "I think Dumbledore tried. I assume so, anyway."

Neither will live while the other survives. The entire Wizarding World knows this by heart now.

Percy nods and tries to look desperate. It is not difficult. "But *why*," he insists, and tries not to notice that Ron's attention is on them too. "I saw him, once, in the Ministry. Why couldn't I have—why couldn't I have—"

Why couldn't I have killed him myself?

Harry's face turns abruptly sympathetic. He knows about guilt. Percy does not know that much about the Boy Who Lived, but he knows that.

"No, Percy," he says gently. He seems to come to a decision, and Percy tenses, sensing the importance of this moment. "He had Horcruxes—well, there was incredibly Dark magic involved, you see. We—we decided not to tell anyone, so that nobody could try it themselves. I'm not going to tell you now. But he split his soul, in a way, and protected it. Until we destroyed all of those pieces, we couldn't destroy him."

Percy feels as though he is reeling. Splitting his soul; the thought is repugnant and grotesque and completely impossible. Nobody can split their soul. How can a soul be a *thing* to be split, to be partitioned like a fruit sliced into pieces?

Harry smiles wryly. "Yes, it's hard to believe. Nobody knew except Dumbledore, who somehow figured it out. So even if you'd tried to kill Tom that day, all that would have happened is that he would have killed you."

For a brief heartbeat of a second, Percy wants to say, *probably for the best*. And then he squashes the urge because he is not prone to making jokes about his death at the anniversary of his brother's.

(The look on Harry's face indicates that Percy was not entirely successful at hiding this thought, but he cannot bring himself to care.)

"But anyone could have destroyed those pieces," Percy persists.

Harry looks distant. "All but one," he says finally. "But the last one required me. That's the prophecy, I think." Harry refuses to say any more, refuses to name the type of magic or provide additional details. Hermione appears at his shoulder with a sweet but steady smile, and then Percy has to give up.

(But buried inside him, a new feeling begins to spark, slowly at first, and then slowly warming until his stomach smoulders with flames. Percy is many things but he does not harbour any illusions about what—about *who*—he is, and he has never been able to give up a challenge once it has been presented.

If anyone could have satisfied *most* of the prophecy…

If there was a way it could have been different…

Why couldn't that anyone be him?)

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When he wakes to the noise and jumbled voices of the Burrow, he mutters a small, wandless *Tempus* charm and he smiles for the first time in two years.

CHAPTER ONE: FOUNDATIONS

1987—1988 (Percy is 11 & 24, Harry is 7. The war is, by some accounts, still approximately a decade away. By others, it will begin in 5 years).

July 1987

The first time that Percy sees Fred, he stumbles back physically into the bannister, his chest seizing with shock. Eight years old and two teeth missing—George had lasted a week before pulling out a matching set—Fred is a manic ball of energy. He and George taunt Ginny, who waddles after them with a snarl, vicious even at five. Ron, hiding in the kitchen, alternates between watching their mum frying bacon and Bill decimating Charlie at chess. Ron turns and faces Percy when he slips into the kitchen. The delight is gratifying to see. Percy had forgotten that he and Ron had once been close, that he had taught Ron chess painstakingly, that he had read him and Ginny stories before bed because the older brood of Weasleys had been too busy for their kid siblings.

He'd been so focused on one sibling he'd forgotten he had five others.

Suddenly his task looms large in front of him and he has to swallow against a sudden burst of fear.

The first task first, and then the second, he counsels himself, as if he were back in school and prioritising for exams. He has a lead now. After all, the task of sending himself back in time had become the task of conducting a broad search into the field of time magic, and then finding the correct set of books in the Library of Records, and then cross referencing his research with magical theory, and then locating the remains of the shattered time turners—helpfully labelled and shelved as appropriate in the Library of Archives—and then disabling the wards around them, and then writing a will and an explanatory letter, and then conducting the chosen ritual, and then awakening into his new life.

Honestly, with the various subterranean libraries of the Ministry (of the old Ministry, the one that guarded the secrets of magic, untouched by the rage of politics), one can do anything. Of course, one requires a formidable mind, an ability to organise information, and a pragmatic attitude. Luckily, Percy has all three, and time to spare.

The Dark Lord was immortal. *Is* immortal, somewhere out there. Percy shivers a little at the thought.

"Perce, *move*," Charlie says grumpily, clearly having lost the chess game.

Percy shakes himself and moves out of the hallway where he had been lingering. "A defeat, I see?" He says after only a minimum pause, trying to remember what he would have said. Who remembers being eleven? He cannot recall what his vocabulary must have been like, but he certainly hopes that his speech patterns now were not similar enough to a child's to be mistaken for them.

(Percy had thought about a lot of things, very methodically, and very carefully. Passing as eleven had merited an entire section of his action plan, but writing down *act eleven* is very different than having to do so, in the flesh, in front of his entire family).

Charlie wrinkles his nose. "I wouldn't call it a *defeat*."

Bill shoulders past Percy as well, snagging his preferred seat at the long and groaning table. "Naturally," he says. "Perhaps you would prefer the term 'humiliation?'"

Charlie looks for a second as if he is going to snap back, but their mother announces breakfast and all hope of conversation is lost.

Percy leans back and tries not to flinch as voices pile over voices. He probably should be enjoying this; he imagines many people would jump at the chance to relive their childhood. But after the last years of a hushed Ministry and a flat conspicuously absent of any traces of the Weasley family, a loud breakfast is jarring.

The first task first, and then the second. Breakfast would come in time.

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The only clue Percy has to go off of is *splitting the soul*. Percy knows very little about souls; he'd always considered soul magic an intangible sort of magic, best shelved with Divination and left for the flighty types. But if the Dark Lord had discovered a way to make himself essentially immortal with soul magic, then Percy will have to become an expert.

(He'd debated waiting, of course. In theory, what mattered was not where one travelled from, but rather where one travelled to. But the thought of waiting another year, or two, or ten with that guilt solidifying in the back of his stomach—it was enough to make even Percival Ignatius Weasley feel impulsive).

He spends the rest of the summer before his first year organising his approach and trying not to flinch at the loud noises constantly permeating the Burrow. He has to become an expert on souls, enough to know both how to split a soul but also how to destroy a shard of one. He has to become an expert on the Dark Lord, if only to find said soul fragments. He has to watch over Harry and gain his trust so that he may recruit him to destroy the last soul fragment and thus fulfil the prophecy. And finally, he has to become at least proficient in duelling and disguise, so that he may travel as necessary to complete the various tasks. His magical core is undernourished, this body never having performed magic, and it will take at least two years of rigorous practice before he will be able to physically handle advanced magic.

Finally, he must leave the timeline as intact as possible until he is ready to make a move. As it stands now, he knows what will happen, at least the broad strokes of it. The moment he interferes, all advantage will be lost.

So. He must wait in the grass and gather his strength for a single, decisive strike.

Percy fancied himself rather good at waiting. The striking, well, would also have to come in time.

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His siblings are all so—small. Even Bill, the eldest, is a gangly seventeen, looking not unlike Ron from the prior timeline. He has not yet grown out his hair nor acquired a fang earring. Ginny, rounding out the other end, is stunningly tiny, and Percy can hardly reconcile her with the fierce and stubborn teenager he left behind, though he soon remembers how stubborn she always was, forced to placate her while the others played Quidditch outside.

Ron is quiet, as always, and fiercely protective of Ginny. Percy watches him more than he does the others, all too aware that it is Ron, this chubby child prone to tears, who contributes the most of the Weasleys to defeating the Dark Lord. Percy cannot quite see the cunning and loyalty that his youngest brother grows into, but he does his best to encourage it, beginning with a quiet tutelage in chess.

Fred and George are Fred and George. The relief and abrupt guilt of seeing them together is sufficient to keep Percy an arm's length away. They gleefully terrorise Ron, and when Percy removes them of that entertainment by sequestering Ron and Ginny away for lessons, turn to each other instead, dark red heads bent together. He watches them often but cannot bear to

speak to them. Either of them. He'd failed them both, and sometimes he still wakes up in his bed in the Burrow with Fred's frozen face fading from his mind, or George's horrified scream.

Charlie trades his time between flying with Bill and chatting idly with Percy. With Charlie's future career in mind, Percy asks him several pointed questions regarding his interest in magical creatures and is rewarded with the disconcerting experience of being the preferred choice of company for one of his siblings. He isn't sure what to do with Charlie's esteem, particularly when he notices his mother smiling approvingly at him socialising.

(His parents, he avoids. He cannot help but see his father, stooped and frail with tears, and his mother sitting unnaturally still, the fight and air leaking out of her open mouth. She makes him a cake for his eleventh birthday, and he barely tastes it).

Percy himself says little. He has never been good with children, and he worries his parents will notice that their middle child woke up with a larger-than-life vocabulary and a cynical worldview that cannot be explained by his brothers' bullying. To his surprise (and mild irritation), nobody questions his silence. He'd forgotten how much he'd faded into the background, even then, how little anyone noticed him.

It doesn't matter, he tells himself when he shuts himself in his room early, right after supper, though the light outside his window will be warm and bright for several more hours. In fact, he spends most of the summer in his room, organising the same scant information he has over and over again, thinking about what lies ahead, rather than what was in his past, flinching as the voices of his siblings pile over each other in a loud, untidy heap.

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September 1987

After a fierce internal debate, Percy takes Scabbers to Hogwarts, like he had in the original timeline. He doesn't want to leave Scabbers at the Burrow, but he does *not* want to let that beast scrabble around his things and his business. He compensates by asking his mother to cast the most powerful ward she knows around the rat's cage to keep him inside. Percy just won't let him out very often.

Gryffindor is the same: plush, red, and stuffy. For a brief second under the hat Percy had worried he would get another House—even, dare he admit it, Slytherin.

But no, the Hat cheerfully admits that his plan has no basis in wisdom, and while Percy certainly will need cunning and dedication to pull it off, he has not yet demonstrated he is either subtle or hard working. (Percy is offended at this last). *The only trait I see in you right now is brave*, the Hat says condescendingly. *That, and desperate*.

Percy lays fuming in his bed as Oliver Wood begins what will be a seven year argument over the best Quidditch team with Alexander Jenkins. Percy barely says a word to either of them at dinner, struck by the sight of Alex, who dies at the Battle of Hogwarts within the first thirty minutes. He talks instead with Andrew and Henry, neither of whom had ever taken too strongly to Percy in the original timeline and therefore cause less of a pang to interact with in

this one. (Percy's cheek still smarts with the remembrance of Oliver's punch, desperately thrown upon learning of his belated reunification with his family and his part in Fred's death).

He is hardly *desperate*, although he hopes he could be considered brave. Well, he *is* desperate, but he is also determined and cunning and ambitious. The long, lazy days of summer healed some of the wild fury in his heart, and he is now able to push aside most of his regret and focus on his goal.

Now, he's at Hogwarts. He has everything he needs.

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"All right, Perce?"

Bill at seventeen is glorious: short, ruffled hair, laughter that turns heads, tall and broad, skin unscathed, gleaming smile. Percy prefers him like this, clean-shaven and unruffled, though he knows from experience that girls seem to like Bill much better with long hair, a dragon-fang earring, and a visible aura of *danger* that is at least half manufactured, or so Percy always uncharitably thought.

He is also very much Head Boy material, and dropping into the unused seat next to Percy at breakfast is but another example of why. Bill, Charlie, and Percy used to have a joke that the three of them were so used to being Head Boy, Quidditch Captain and Prefect in their own households that falling into the routine at school was easy.

Percy wonders if he will be Head Boy in this timeline. He isn't sure whether he wants to be. Doubtlessly he'd be capable, but it may interfere with the task at hand.

Bill looks around him brightly, as if eating with a lonely eleven year old is normal. "Haven't met your yearmates yet, have you? Don't worry, friendship will come in time." He winks and leans in. "Between you and me, Perce, the lads in Gryffindor can be a bit dull."

Percy has to grin at this, even for the remembrance of seven years of those very same lads. Percy had woken early to shower and dress before his roommates, wanting some time to savour the first day of the rest of his life. "Yes, I can imagine, lads like you," he says, his voice weaker than he'd like. A month of his squeaky voice had not replaced the memory of his deeper tones and he has to forcibly repress the urge to try and speak in a lower register. He can only imagine what his brothers would have to say about that.

Bill nudges him and reaches over his plate to grab a few kippers from the platter. Nasty, oily things; Percy watches with a wrinkled nose as Bill crunches them down whole. Percy has never been particularly hungry at breakfast, particularly after he graduated from Hogwarts and had to prepare it himself, so it typically is all he can do to force down some toast merely for the sake of sustenance. "You shouldn't be too stressed," he continues. Bill had always been like that, willing to doggedly continue with a conversation no matter how awkward the subject matter. "We're very proud of you, and you'll do well here. Being part of Hogwarts doesn't mean you aren't part of the family. Charlie and I will look after you, not that you'll need it."

Percy is surprised by how much this means to him and has to busy himself with pouring a cup of tea. “Thanks,” he says, finally.

I will see you through unscathed, he promises both the shining boy beside him and the elder, mauled man from his memories. *I will protect you like you tried to protect me.*

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"Win-gar-dium Lev-i-o-sa," Percy repeats obediently with the class. His feather, trapped under his book, flutters in response, even though Percy's wand is stowed in his bookbag.

Master wandless magic, he adds to his mental list of tasks, which really needs to become a physical list as soon as Percy has access to a journal and the magical strength to perform a strong warding spell. He is reasonably proficient with smaller spells, but he should at least be able to do a wandless Stupefy and perhaps a Protego.

Oliver notices Percy's feather moving and scowls. He reaches into his bag, presumably to grip his wand. Percy debates informing him that he's liable to levitate his bag in that position but refrains.

When he had considered sending himself back to his first year, he had thought it logical: maximise time with Hogwarts' resources sans the Dark Lord in order to be prepared for his strike. He has four full silent years before Harry comes to Hogwarts and the war begins. It should be plenty of time to take careful, quiet action.

What he had not considered was that he would have to retake an entire seven years of classes. Percy had achieved thirteen Outstanding OWLs, but even he had not mastered every spell on the first try, nor been particularly noteworthy in Potions. Faced with blending in with eleven year olds, however, he does not quite know how to make his magic *not* work.

"Excellent, Mr. Weasley," Flitwick says delightedly when, fifteen minutes later, Percy's feather rises steadily into the air. "A powerful spell. Five points to Gryffindor."

Percy smiles blandly, though he has to admit receiving the points does give him a shade of the old joy. Being praised for a Levitation charm is akin to being praised for dressing himself in the morning, or holding a fork at the table. These types of spells have become so instinctual to Percy that as an adult wizard he often cast them without even realising that his wand had moved or his mouth had formed an incantation.

For the rest of the class, he practices. How to make his feather wobble; how to say the spell without imbuing it with magic; how to guess what will happen when he mispronounces the word.

He will have to study, it seems, and the challenge fills him with a certain sense of satisfaction. He knows almost all there is to know about the spells itself, at least those in the curriculum. He can recite their incantation, perform their gestures, and even explain the history when applicable. What he cannot do, however, is explain *why* the spell works the way it does. He makes small notes to himself in the margins as his classmates struggle to write

down the theory of the levitation charm, several of them spilling ink on their hands like it is their first experience working with quills, or taking notes in a hurry.

(Percy had practised, the first time, before going to Hogwarts. His mother had taught all of his siblings to use a quill early, but she'd happily created additional handwriting exercises for him when he'd asked, setting him up at the kitchen table with a long scroll of parchment. She'd read out loud from *Beedle the Bard* and he'd raced to copy all of her words as quickly as he could).

"I didn't know you're a swot," Oliver says nastily as they walk out.

Percy raises an eyebrow. He can't remember Oliver disliking him so much in the original timeline, although Percy had never spent much time with him, due to his general disinterest in the gameplay of Quidditch (though, he admits, he enjoys watching the payoff). "Now you do," he says mildly.

Oliver's scowl deepens. "Just trying to show off."

The other boys look at each other uneasily. It is too early in the term to take sides.

Percy does not quite know how to deal with a petulant eleven year old and so only shrugs. "Sometimes certain spells or types of magic come more easily to some people," he explains instead, figuring he will at least take the opportunity to disseminate some magical theory. "It's actually quite interesting. I suggest you look into it. You'll have to find what classes or types of magic are easy for you."

"Five points to Gryffindor, *Professor*," says Oliver, speeding up. The other boys follow after a pause where it becomes apparent that Percy is not going to respond.

Act eleven, he reminds himself, though it would be easier to act like a Muggle.

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When the weekend comes, Percy welcomes it with relief. He wakes early and makes a beeline for the library, where he greets Madam Pince fondly and bags his favourite table before anyone can walk in.

He does not have a journal, as he really should, but he has plenty of extra sheets of parchment —provided for free for all Hogwarts students in the front of the library and in all Common Rooms—and can muster up the magical strength to enchant them with a simple word-blurring charm. He'll most certainly need more advanced protection later on, but for the time being, he does not think anyone will be looking too closely at his notes.

Percy begins with a timeline of the last two wars, written as neatly and detailed as he can remember. He had not risked writing any of his plans while at the Burrow; his mother was not known for respecting her sons' privacy.

There are plenty of books at Hogwarts that speak of the First War. He begins to levitate a large selection of them over to his desk, but they crash to the ground midway through the

spell and he has to quickly retrieve them before Madam Pince swoops down on him.

His magic is *tired*. It is a strange feeling, and not one he has felt for very many years. *Practice magic*, he adds to the top of his running priority-task list after stacking the last of the books by hand on the side table he'd dragged over, also by hand, to house his research materials. Honestly, being eleven is rather like being a Squib.

The First War, he confirms shortly, is shrouded in mystery, largely because nobody is quite sure of who the Dark Lord *was*. Is. Many of the books were too afraid to even write the name *Voldemort* in print. *Obtain better materials,* Percy writes grumpily at the end of his list. Grumpily, since without any money, he's rather stuck with the Hogwarts collection.

Luckily, Harry made it clear that the most feared wizard of their generation was a half-blood: Tom Riddle, previous Hogwarts student.

Unluckily, the Hogwarts library does not have much about its students. The best Percy can do for now is note Riddle's enrollment and graduation dates and list the Award for Special Services that Riddle rather suspiciously won. He cajoles Pince into retrieving the student periodicals and flips through his parents' years in a desultory fashion until she disappears, at which point he grabs a much earlier stack.

Riddle graduates, looking cold and commanding and handsome in his graduation robes, Head Boy badge pinned to his chest, the Head Girl barely notable beside him. He is not featured, per se, in any of the articles or pictures, but he is present in many of them, lingering just out of frame, quoted here and there. If not popular, he was clearly respected. And yet, after Riddle graduates, he just—disappears. He does not have employment listed in the back section of the graduation periodical, unlike many of his classmates. Years pass, and then suddenly, the terror begins.

It begins slowly, as far as he can tell, flipping through old and wizened newspapers. Grindlewald's defeat commands headline news for much of 1945. A disappearance here, a murder there. The *Prophet* spends an entire year reporting on the Knights of Walpurgis, whoever they are. The appellation *He Who Must Not Be Named* does not appear in print nearly until the end.

From what he knows of the second war, however, it should not be a surprise that the Wizarding World was so slow to catch on. From Harry's account, the Dark Lord is active to some degree for four years before he completes the resurrection ritual, and it took a further year for the Ministry to acknowledge his return. (He ignores the flare of shame that accompanies this thought with practice). By then, of course, it was too late for the *Prophet* to be considered anything close to reliable.

Clearly, Tom Riddle becomes immortal before he kills Harry. The question is not only *how*, but also *when*.

To do that, he must study the man himself and see if he can discern any clues.

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November 1987

Professor McGonagall eyes him over a steaming cup of tea.

Percy looks down. He can't help it; Minerva McGonagall will always be able to make him feel eleven years old, regardless of his physical or mental age.

"What are we going to do with you, Mr. Weasley," she says crisply, but not unkindly.

Percy wants to cringe. He'd known this was coming—all the Heads of House are required to meet each student at least once a year—but he somehow had not thought his meeting would be quite so early, nor challenging.

"What did I do, Professor?" Percy responds when it becomes apparent she is content to wait him out. He will have to remember that trick, if he is every faced with an enemy, or a petulant child.

McGonagall gestures briskly at the report in front of her, somehow managing to make the gesture encompass his entire first two months at Hogwarts. "Nothing is a challenge for you, is it, Mr. Weasley."

"Quidditch, ma'am."

This surprises a chuckle out of her, and some small tension creeps out of the open window, where the first year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws swoop below on broomsticks. "That is apparent, although Madam Hooch tells me there are some potential athletes in your year. For you, however, your talents clearly lie along another route."

Percy sits quietly, his hand folded. Oh, he tried to take it slowly, to not transfigure the match, to keep his feather pinned to the desk. He's been studying the theory, too, practising wandless and wordless magic instead of his assignments, striving to see what makes a spell work. He's achieving perfectly outstanding grades in his other classes, Astronomy and Potions and Care of Magical Creatures. In those, he merely keeps quiet, often lost in his own thoughts.

In the spell-based classes, however, he cannot seem to keep himself from casting the damned spell. The unintended result of practising wandless and wordless magic is that he must make an effort not to think of the spell at all when the class practices the incantation, lest he accidentally produce the result.

Something does feel different, though, when he says a spell with the intention to cast. He can feel the difference between activating his magic and merely reciting the words. What he struggles with is control, with consciously producing one effect or another.

"And thus I have come to the conclusion that, though it is early in the term, I must recommend you for extra tutelage, if you are interested."

Percy's head snaps up. It is rare—if not impossible—to receive a recommendation for extra tutelage as a first year. Percy first began taking extra lessons as a third year, and even that was considered precocious.

Pride mingles with guilt, but pride wins out. "Thank you, Professor," he says, already envisioning how he will tell his parents. He tries to look innocent in a way that conveys *young prodigy* and not *time traveller*.

McGonagall nods briskly. "Just as a trial basis, we will begin with Transfiguration. If you seem to be handling the extra course work, I shall ask Professor Flitwick to take you on in Charms. I would also recommend Potions, perhaps next year, although Professor Snape is...selective about the students he takes."

Percy wants to snort. Professor Snape only deigned to take Percy as an extra student after he achieved an Outstanding on his OWLs, and even then, he had never graced Percy with private lessons. Percy had been relegated to group tutelage, wherein he sat with a bundle of other upper years and essentially took an extra Potions class a week. (Although, he has to concede, that was how he began dating Penelope, so he supposes it was not entirely for naught).

Professor McGonagall leans forward to give him a strict look. "When I say handling the course work, I do not mean merely receiving good marks, is that clear, Mr. Weasley? I expect you to take the lessons seriously, be punctual and responsible, and, most importantly, continue to spend time on other activities. You are not at Hogwarts only to study. I cannot help but notice that you are not close to any of your peers."

It would be more accurate to say his peers are not close with him, but Percy correctly divines the response to this comment would not be positive. "I am not very interested in playing Quidditch, but I do go to the matches," Percy says instead, hiding a scowl. He'd received this lecture during the last timeline as well.

"I admit your roommates do appear to be rather interested in Quidditch, but I would encourage you to consider others as friends as well. You need not only be friends with those you live with. Consider some of the girls—I know Mariana Merryweather is rather interested in Charms, for instance. Or you may look to the second years, or those from other houses. Landon Greengrass, Ravenclaw, is coming second in your year. Lastly, do not believe Quidditch is the only activity you may participate in. I know for a fact that your father was rather good at Gobstones, your brother William was briefly in the Chess Club, and your mother was the president of the Painting Club her seventh year."

In the first timeline, Percy had joined the Chess Club precisely to discourage this type of advice. He had not enjoyed it at all, though he supposed he had improved at the game. Now, he has little interest in drawing attention to himself as some sort of chess prodigy. Perhaps painting. He has never painted a day in his life, and it is supposed to be rather humbling to pursue an activity in which one is not proficient.

"I will join something, Professor," he promises seriously.

Her lips twitch, perhaps because in his reedy eleven year old voice, serious proclamations sound utterly ridiculous.

"I am glad to hear it, Mr. Weasley. I shall see you on Monday at seven o'clock."

***

Children are—tiresome.

Percy is surprised by how much it grates on him. He hadn't really anticipated his peers posing any real obstacle to his mission. When he'd envisioned this mission he'd rather thought he'd spend all of Hogwarts doing research. Classes and socializing he spared little thought.

And yet so many hours a day are spent in the company of literal children. Both boys and girls are messy and bratty, shockingly naive and at times seemingly clueless. However, he cannot be alone for seven years, and so at supper instead of sitting by himself with a book, he reaches for his courage and sits next to Mariana. As the first years still sit in an amorphous group, friendships and cliques not yet solidified, the look she gives him is curious but not hostile.

His peers in this timeline do not respect academic merit any more than they did in the previous timeline, though he has to admit he hadn't been as much of a pariah last time. He cannot shake the feeling that his pretence of being eleven is somehow *inappropriate*. He's nearly twenty-five; isn't it wrong, somehow, to be befriending small children?

Henry sits across. Henry is the heir to one of the old, Light families, the Steelefellows, and one of those rare Gryffindor scions who is serious instead of careless. While Percy and Henry were not friends, per se, in the original timeline, they often partnered up for projects. Henry was not particularly brilliant, but he at least recognised the importance of his coursework and therefore could be counted upon to complete his work diligently and well.

"Hallo, Mariana," he greets her ceremoniously.

Mariana grins at him. The second heir to a wealthy family herself—her prat of an older brother, Gregory, a pompous and self-important fifth year—she knows Henry from the privileged gatherings the Weasleys were not invited to due to their lower standing in society. "Hallo, Henry, how do you do?"

With Mariana, Percy remembers idly, it is often difficult to separate mockery from earnestness in her tone. Although Percy was always a bit aloof from his peers, it is impossible to live for seven years with the same people, taking nearly all the classes together, without getting to know each person well. Seeing them all again as children is shocking, particularly when he remembers or notices something he'd never even known that he knew.

"I had my assessment with McGonagall," Percy says, for lack of much else.

Mariana immediately rolls her eyes. "Mine was boring," she reveals, as if it were a secret. She mimics McGonagall's Scottish brogue. "Are doing well in your classes, do you have any friends, and have you considered Quidditch?"

Henry and Percy both laugh. "Mine was rather similar, except she didn't try and recommend Quidditch," Percy says.

Henry nods sagely. "She must have heard from Oliver."

Oliver's latest gripe with Percy is that he claims absolutely no knowledge of any Quidditch teams. To be fair, Percy actually enjoys a good game of Quidditch. However, he isn't confident in his ability to recall dates. He'd picked the Chudley Cannons as his team, as he can safely assume they are always losing, and Oliver had walked away in disgust.

"She wants me to join a club," he explains. "I'm thinking about Painting."

"Do you know how to paint?"

Percy shakes his head. "But I have been told it is a positive experience to be bad at something," he says, sharing his earlier philosophical thought, and is rewarded by two snorts. He had been serious, but he supposes he should be pleased that his peers think him funny. He's never been thought of as funny before.

***

"*Accio*," Percy mutters harshly to himself, pointing his wand at a boulder near the lake.

He ducks instinctively, but when he looks up, he finds the boulder has barely moved.

Percy's lips turn down. As every fifth year learns, the difficulty of the Summoning Spell relies on the weight of the object, the distance between the castor and the object, the familiarity with said object—or more accurately, the ability of the castor to picture the object clearly—and whether unimpeded visual eye contact is possible.

Here, Percy has no distractions; he is a mere two or three metres from the boulder; he has examined it carefully, as to become familiar with its shape; and he has clear eye contact.

The boulder is heavy, yes, but it should have at least rolled partially toward him.

"Accio," he spits out again, waving his wand with a bit more force.

He breaks out into a light sweat as he locks eyes with the boulder, willing it to move. This spell would be entirely out of reach for the average eleven year old, but Percy is not average. He should be able to get it to work.

With a great feeling of frustration and rage, he points his wand again at the offending rock. "*Accio boulder!*"

Everything goes black.

He wakes to the Hospital Wing, and to the unforgiving scowl of Professor Snape.

"You're a bit of an idiot, Mr. Weasley," Snape says presently, upon seeing Percy crack open his blurry eyes. "Practising OWL level spells unsupervised near the lake, and on *boulders*?"

"Did the boulder hit me, sir?" Percy asks, a bit hopefully.

Snape smirks thinly. "That would require the spell to have worked, Mr. Weasley. No, I believe you merely exhausted your magical core. I have prepared you a tonic; Madam

Pomfrey shall keep you here for examination for the rest of the weekend. Mr. Weasley—do try not to kill yourself practicing advanced spells. Likely they will remain out of your reach forever."

Percy frowns blackly but his irritation only seems to bring Snape additional pleasure. The professor raises an eyebrow mockingly and then sweeps away.

Madam Pomfrey gives him a second to glower to himself before she swoops in, tonic in hand. "Mr. Weasley, that was incredibly stupid of you," she chides, pouring him a measured amount of the red liquid. "You are merely a first year; you have plenty of time to practice advanced magic."

Percy takes the tonic without comment. Perhaps boulders were ambitious, but he's tired of feeling weak, as if his magic does not belong to him. He wants to get it under control, and the sooner, the better.

***

Tom Riddle, he soon learns, was everything that Percy wanted—perhaps, he admits privately, still wants—to be.

He is handsome and confident, the few pictures of him included in various yearbooks highlighting the cold grace of his body. Percy lingers over one featuring seventh year Tom and a group of young men, all with Slytherin ties. Riddle makes a joke—Percy can hear it echo in his mind, cutting and witty—and the other boys laugh, angling their bodies toward him. Just before the picture resets, Riddle stares directly at the camera, and his gaze is a cold challenge.

Prefect, Head Boy, Award for Special Services. Thirteen OWLs. Twelve NEWTs; at some point, he drops Divination.

And then he just disappears. It doesn't make sense to Percy. One does not rise to the top of one's year and then *disappear*.

Riddle doesn't enter the Ministry. A quick owl to the Library of Records confirms that no Ministry employee named Tom Riddle is hired at any point after Tom's graduation. He doesn't appear to graduate from any magical university that Percy can think of, though he cannot confirm that he never enrolled. Percy looks again at his academic record and muses. If he were Riddle, what career would he pursue?

He'd join the Ministry to gain power and influence. Riddle, Percy feels almost instinctively, would want power and influence. Perhaps the Ministry didn't accept Riddle, half blood.

(That reminds him. He knows Riddle's blood status because Harry took great pleasure in spreading it after the war. But who were Riddle's parents? Where did he live during summers? He adds it to the list, which has really begun to grow out of control).

So, Riddle is rejected from the Ministry and moves on. Where does he move on to?

This is easy for Percy to consider, as he'd made a similar list his final year of school under the assumption that his father's blundering would prevent him from securing a decent position at the Ministry.

Talented Hogwarts students become curse breakers, Aurors, university students, researchers, Healers. They enter the Wizangamot if their parents are wealthy and can bequeath them a seat. Usually, however, they pick the Ministry department most suited to their interests and rise the political ladder.

Riddle would not become an Auror, something he confirms when he finds who sat the entrance exam the first few years after 1945. (Government public records are a marvellous thing). He does not appear to become a Healer, though those records are not as easily accessible. Perhaps a curse breaker? Those programs are often international and expose their students to wild and fascinating branches of magic. Percy would have done it if Bill hadn't already gone that route.

Riddle, he feels, would have been interested in obscure magic. That would explain where he disappeared to after Hogwarts. These foreign countries often do not hold themselves to the same standard of record keeping as does the Queen's land.

Percy had wanted to do the same, if he is being honest. Perhaps if Bill and Charlie hadn't done it first, perhaps if he hadn't been so convinced that he could achieve something at the Ministry. Percy hadn't applied to any of the programs he'd been interested in, but he'd kept the brochures, hidden away from everyone.

Riddle wouldn't have had any family to stop him from fleeing England and making a name for himself. In a way, Percy envies him for it.

***

December 1987

Lessons with McGonagall are interesting but still rudimentary, of course. However, she enthusiastically endorses his hesitant request to learn everything about *why* magic works as it does. Her suggested reading list is basic, but he thinks he can ask her for a pass to the Restricted Section at some point.

It's funny; studying magic for the second time, reading between the lines of the textbook, thinking critically about the words used and the movements required and the patterns that he begins to see underlying every action—it makes his magic feel different. Percy is not a particularly powerful wizard, though he is rather knowledgeable. Sometimes when he casts spells now, he feels a thrumming in his body, a warmth something like the feeling of getting an answer right or basking in his parents' rare pride, a humming as something inside him clicks into place.

When that happens, his spells are a bit crisper and more precise, the colours more vibrant. When that happens, he feels strong.

***

The rest of the first term passes without much incident. He does not make anyone cry, which is an improvement over the first time around. He reads most of the non-restricted books about soul magic—of which there are a grand total of fourteen, a mere droplet when compared to the Hogwarts library—and closes each one with disgust. They are all equally useless, speculative and poorly researched, lacking substance.

(It does not occur to him that the lack of information in the Hogwarts library is intentional. Percy has not yet learned to distrust his education).

He needs a way to access either the Restricted Section or outside resources. As McGonagall refused his last request to the Restricted Section on the grounds of him being *too young*, and, funnily enough, as he lacks any money for the same reason, he finds himself momentarily stymied.

And so he returns again to the scant information about Tom Riddle's life, sure in the conviction that to understand the Dark Lord he will have to understand this cold, imperious teenager.

***

Winter arrives with a shiver. Percy bundles up irritatedly until they can finally leave the draughty castle and go home. It will be his first Christmas in the Burrow for many years. He thinks back to the last time he sat in their shabby living room, looking at the large and glittering tree (likely the same as last year's, under a strong preservation charm). 1990, he thinks, his fourth year. After that the Weasleys had begun to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas, perhaps because more of them were there than at home. And then, of course, Percy had walked out on his family, and he hadn't returned.

The most recent Christmas in his old life had technically been at the Burrow, but George hadn't shown up, and then Ron had stormed off to get him, and then Bill and his father had gotten into a tremendous row, and Harry, Ginny and Hermione had followed Ron, and Percy had slunk away in shame.

Seeing the handmade ornaments on the tree, and the bulky presents in wrapping paper that Ginny undoubtedly picked out (she always chose green), and hearing that blasted Celestina on the radio—Percy has to take a second to himself.

Percy's sweater this year is a roaring Gryffindor red, as is tradition for the first year Weasley. The P is an ornate gold, and Bill charms it to glitter. "Congratulations again on Gryffindor," his father says when he sees the atrocity on his son's chest. "Professor McGonagall wrote to tell us that she's offered you extra lessons. Already!"

Percy's warm feeling is interrupted by his twin brothers snorting in unison.

"Who's surprised," says George, flapping a dismissive hand. "Perfect Percy already asking for *extra lessons*."

Fred raises his voice to a falsetto. "Oh, Professor McGonagall, more homework, oh, *please*!"

Percy scowls. "When you two come to Hogwarts you would do well to focus on your homework," he lectures. "And my lessons aren't for extra homework, they're because I've already surpassed the class material."

"It's very impressive," Bill says in an attempt to be placating that lands solidly in the realm of condescension. Percy glowers at him next.

"Did you do any extra lessons, Bill?" Ginny asks, looking up at her favourite brother.

Bill shakes his head. Percy rolls his eyes. Of course Bill never took tutelage; he never seemed to spend a single second focusing on his school work, and yet managed to achieve stellar results without blinking. "Too busy with Quidditch and all," he excuses himself.

"I'm taking extra lessons with Professor Kettleburn," Charlie says. "Care of Magical Creatures, you know."

"Sure, but that's cool," says Fred, spreading his palms. "You learn about dragons and gryphons and werewolves."

"I'll have you know that Transfiguration is very interesting—"

"*Enough*," his mother breaks in, and they all subside. "It's time for lunch."

The attention does not turn back to Percy for the rest of the day, particularly as Bill very magnanimously reveals he purchased presents for each sibling. Only Honeydukes candy, and nothing particularly special, but it is the first time they receive presents from someone other than their parents, and so the younger brood crowds around Bill for the rest of the day.

Percy rebelliously eats a Sugar Quill and pretends that he is not still resentful at his eldest brother.

***

January 1988

Winter holidays are enough time to remind Percy why he'd grown tired of living at home in the first place. While he hasn't quite become inured to the sudden shock of seeing his various siblings alive and young and happy, he has recovered enough that he cannot prevent his irritation from colouring some of their interactions, rather than guilt. Even one Weasley sibling would be loud and active and chaotic, but to have six of them corralled in the leaning, creaking Burrow? Percy had begun to feel rattled after the first night.

Ginny wails as they pull up to the Hogwarts Express, clearly unwilling to let Bill go. He gives her several hugs and promises to write, and she turns on Charlie next, and finally even clutches Percy's hand.

He ignores how sticky her fingers are and tightens his grasp, feeling guilty for his earlier annoyance. Ginny is so small, now, barely seven. She's not even Bill's age when she helps to fight a war. She's barely Percy's age—his new one—when she is possessed by a basilisk.

"Ow, Percy," she cries, yanking her hand from his sudden vice grips.

Why is he such an idiot?

He'd ignored Ginny's attempt to tell him the first time and then completely forgotten about her possession when reconstructing the timeline. He's a terrible brother and Ginny deserves better. More importantly, he's an idiot, because the diary that endangered Ginny was named *Tom.* They'd all heard the name often enough in her nightmares.

Tom, like Tom Riddle.

Tom, like the Dark Lord.

His diary is part of his soul, Percy thinks, and he feels a sudden rush of elation. He has a clue, finally.

***

Spring term arrives without thawing the ice on the drive to Hogwarts or the chill permeating Percy’s every move. On the train, he snags a compartment with an older Ravenclaw that gives him a dismissive look and then turns to her book. He sits, staring out of the window, trying to remember everything about Ginny's possession.

He didn't know much, he realises. He'd been in sixth year at the time, preoccupied with his Prefect status and his relationship with Penny and his growing unease with his family. Ginny had tried to talk to him and he'd brushed her off, believing she was choosing her other brothers over him, as usual, and planning to reveal his secret. There had been some ridiculous rumour over Harry Potter being the Heir of Slytherin, which he hadn't quite believed but nonetheless worried him enough to encourage Ron to think critically about his relationship with the Boy Who Lived. Then, Penny herself had been Petrified, and he hadn't been able to think about much at all.

The next thing he can remember is Ginny, missing, and those awful bloody words, and the thought that he was going to have to tell their mother that Ginny's skeleton was in the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry had pulled some rescue stunt—Ron swore Harry slayed the basilisk with a sword, which Percy had thought at the time was clearly a lie, given no twelve year old boy could take on a basilisk—and Percy had been summoned to the hospital wing. His parents had given him, Fred, and George a clearly abridged version, claiming Ginny had been possessed by a diary of a dark wizard and forced to free the basilisk.

She'd been so small, sleeping in the hospital wing, a bruise on her cheek. Percy and the twins had sat silently by her bed for hours, not making eye contact, each thinking with shame: why hadn't they noticed?

That summer, Ginny had been quiet and withdrawn, avoiding their mother and spending hours with their father in the shed. She'd gone flying on brooms the twins finally offered her, she'd curled up in Bill's lap, and she and Ron went on long walks.

Percy hadn't spent much time with her, unsure about what to say, how to apologise. His room was relatively close to Ginny, though, and he'd heard her scream and beg to Tom. The nights were the only time he felt comfortable enough to give her comfort, usually a cup of lemon ginger tea and a hesitant hug if she was crying.

Had he not asked who Tom was? Did anyone else put it together? Ginny must have known. Ron, too. Definitely Harry. Had his parents known? His older brothers?

(Why hadn't he been told?)

He will make it up to her in this timeline, he vows. She may still need to be subject to the diary—it will depend on the state of the timeline by the time she reaches the appropriate age—but he will watch her and guard her and protect her from harm.

In the meantime, he has something to guide his research.

***

He fails to make headway with the Horcruxes, or even to understand more fully what they are. This rankles him; if the *Trio*, barely educated, could find them out, he should be able to, easily.

However, he is undeniably stuck. He doesn't know where Ginny obtained the diary from, only that she had begun writing in it shortly after her first year began. From the Trio's exploits during the war, he concludes at least one Horcrux is probably in Gringotts. Aside from that, he really cannot say what or where any of the others would be, or even how many there are. Three, seven, and thirteen are the most magically powerful numbers, so he'd bet it was one of those three, but his Arithmancy is rather basic compared to what it could be. Possibly he is missing some clue. If only he knew what a Horcrux *was*.

He needs a money-making scheme but can't think of anything an eleven year old would be able to do. One day, as he stares at the parchment covered in the timeline to come, he thinks again of Sirius Black—but dismisses the idea out of hand. Breaking Sirius out could have catastrophic consequences, even if the man could likely fund his entire venture, and, if Percy had a good sense of his character from Harry's innumerable stories, would be just the type of reckless Gryffindor to be convinced by a time travelling child to defeat Voldemort.

***

Instead, he practices magic.

He'd never practised too much magic during his years at Hogwarts. He *did* study, of course, enough to pass all of his exams and to be considered fairly proficient. But his command of magic barely held a candle to his command of theory, which was prodigious.

To rise through the Ministry, one has to pass a series of qualification exams. As with any exam in his entire life, Percy had passed easily. But he'd never quite studied for them the way he studied now—relearning the entire curriculum with two decades of experience, understanding *why* spells worked the way they did.

He started with first year spells, primarily to avoid suspicion, but found himself drawn into the theory. An entire day was devoted to the Levitation charm, until Percy finally understood that what the charm *actually* did was, somehow, harden the air beneath the object.

(In his past life and this, Percy never was exposed to Muggle science. In both lives, had he known, he would have found this to be one of the largest tragedies of his education).

He reads, and reads, and reads, until he's mastered the entire year curriculum. His peers eye him sideways, but their glances are easy to ignore.

When he's done reading for the day, he heads to an alcove he found in the previous timeline and practices until he no longer feels like he wants to collapse at a simple spell.

***

April 1988

Percy goes home for the one week Easter holiday, though at some point in the original timeline he'd begun staying at school to prepare for exams. He's glad he did, as Bill takes the time to casually inform his parents that he intends to study in Egypt after graduation.

"*Egypt,*" his mother shrieks, so loudly that all the siblings turn as one, scenting blood. "Egypt?"

"The program is very respected," Bill says, brandishing a pamphlet. His ears go a bit red when he notices his siblings watching, but he perseveres, speaking in a calm and rational voice that Percy knows he uses as Head Boy. "I've received a complete scholarship. Professor Flitwick helped me apply."

"You're graduating and moving back home," she continues as if he hadn't said a word. "There are plenty of programs here to attend."

"Not in *curse breaking*," Bill emphasises. "The British are a bunch of pansies when it comes to curses, it's all blood supremacists cursing their Dark Artefacts to hurt Muggles. We need people like Dad to deal with those."

"You can go work with your father, then."

Bill is nothing if not persistent "The Egyptians have thousands and thousands of years of history. They had civilizations while we were sitting around in the dirt. Think of what I can learn, Mum!"

"Think of what dangers you'll face!"

Bill looks pleadingly at their father, who clears his throat and tries to speak up. "Er, Molly, if Professor Flitwick approves of the program—"

"Arthur, who knows what he'll encounter in those, those, those *pyramids*, and the *tombs*, and Merlin knows what else." Molly turns and looks at Bill with some finality. "You're not going."

"I'm seventeen, Mum, I'm an adult and can make my own decisions."

"You're not throwing away your career to study skeletons in Egypt!"

The argument is vicious and lasts the entire holidays without a resolution. Percy stays somewhat quiet, aware of how this ends. In the original timeline he'd supported their mother, agreeing that going to some strange and foreign country to study bizarre curses was not the proper path for a Hogwarts Head Boy. This had not endeared him to Bill nor Charlie, who proceeded to ignore him for their remaining shared time at Hogwarts.

In this timeline, he remembers visiting Egypt with his family, how confidently Bill had led them around the pyramids and into the tombs, how well respected he'd become in the program. In this timeline, he has bigger fish to fry than his brother's rebellious streak.

As a result, he's included in the war council held upon their return to Hogwarts, wherein Bill explains crisply that he's packing his bags, applying for the student visa, and will be departing soon after graduation.

"She'll be mad," he says unnecessarily. "But we've got to go after our dreams, lads, and I *cannot* stay at the Burrow after graduation."

This at least they are all in agreement about, though Percy distinctly remembers a time when the thought of living in the Burrow was preferable to the fear of moving out. He'd outgrown that by thirteen or fourteen, though.

"You'll have to write," Charlie says earnestly. "We'll miss you, won't we, Perce?"

He nods. "Yes, please write," he adds when there is an expectant pause.

Bill squints at him. "You're not going to tell, are you?"

Percy draws himself up, affronted. "Of course not."

"I'm surprised you're taking this so well. I would have thought you'd be on Mum's side."

Percy can't be too offended at this accurate prediction of his reaction, so he shrugs and responds, "Well, you're right, Egypt has a long and fascinating history. The British aren't known for their curses, really. Maybe blood magic or land magic, you know, spells that connect to the lakes and the hills, but not curses."

He'd done quite a lot of reading about it the first time they'd gone to Egypt, after all.

Bill looks mildly impressed. The conversation turns to logistics—how does one leave the country without parental consent, even if one is of age—and Percy relaxes. They'll have to go to Egypt this time too, he realises, in order for Black to see the pictures of Pettigrew.

It's funny how these things work. He'd been so angry and resentful that the second they came into some money, his parents had squandered it on a massive family trip to Egypt. What about their bills, or new wands, or new clothes? The cost of the international portkeys alone had eaten up much of the winnings.

But if they hadn't gone to Egypt, Black wouldn't have broken out, and everything would have been different.

***

May 1988

How did Tom *find* the Chamber of Secrets? Even Percy, who attended Hogwarts at the time of its opening, does not know where it is. Percy had been Head Boy too; he'd done his share of wandering the castle on patrols, particularly since his seventh year coincided with the year Sirius Black broke out of Hogwarts.

(It still warms him, a little, to think that Dumbledore had known the threat the castle would be under and chose him of all the seventh years to be Head Boy, trusting the students to his care).

Fred and George hadn't found the Chamber of Secrets despite finding nearly all the secret passageways. How had Riddle?

Percy reads every book in the library that he can find on the Chamber. While he learns quite a bit of interesting lore about the Founders, he cannot find a single reference to where the actual chamber may be located.

One evening, he is flipping idly through old *Prophets* when a date jumps out at him.

Tom Riddle, as it turns out, wins his award the same year as the Chamber of Secrets allegedly opened the first time.

Moaning Myrtle, as it turns out, dies right around the same time.

Hagrid, as it turns out, is expelled at the end of the year.

Amazing what the *Prophet* reports if one reads between the lines.

***

Moaning Myrtle looks at him suspiciously. "Who're you, then? Come to have a laugh, have you?"

Percy blinks at her. "Why would I come all the way here to laugh at you?"

Myrtle laughs wetly. He eyes her and is thankful that he waterproofed his notes in advance. "You know why! Poor Moaning Myrtle, trapped in a toilet—"

"How did you die, Myrtle?" Percy says, getting straight to the point. He's not got the time for a ghost's histrionics.

This abruptly cuts off what threatens to be quite the spectacle. Instead, Myrtle preens. Percy resists the urge to back up to drier land. "Oh, you want to know how I died," she says,

dreamily. “A horrid story, really. I was in here, crying, because that nasty Olive insulted my glasses, and I heard a voice, a boy, and I left the stall, and the next thing I knew…”

“Dead?” Percy offers dryly in response to her meaningful pause.

“Dead!” Myrtle confirms delightedly. “I stayed on, of course, to torment Olive.”

Percy is startled. “You damned yourself to a life of eternal lingering to torment a girl that teased you?”

Despite its insubstantial form, Myrtle's smile is wicked. “Oh, yes. Teach that bitch to make fun of me. I don't regret it, either. It gets a bit dull, and you are all horribly cruel, but it's better than being *truly* dead, I imagine.”

“You are truly dead, though,” Percy cannot help but point out.

At once, Myrtle's entire demeanour changes. “How *dare* you, you nasty boy! You just want to rub it in, don't you? Don't you know that I am a *ghost*, and we are not *truly* dead, we are *lingering?”*

“First of all, I already used the word lingering, so obviously I know something about ghosts,” Percy snaps back. “Secondly, you are dead by every metric. You don’t breathe, you don’t do magic, you don’t age. Your soul—” He stops. “What happens to your soul when you are a ghost?”

This placates Myrtle and she turns thoughtful. “I've discussed this a few times with Anthony —the Fat Friar. He thinks the soul departs, but a shade of us remains. The same thing that gets put into all of those portraits. Except they have to be painted by somebody, and *we* create ourselves. There’s power in a dying wish, you know.”

Percy forgets for a second about Tom Riddle and gapes at her. She meets his gaze, seemingly unoffended at his surprise.

“That's—really fascinating, actually,” Percy manages, his brain buzzing. He itches to put aside Riddle for a second and look into it. But, he came here with an agenda and finish it he must. “But I wanted to ask you some other things, Myrtle. Er, to begin, what House were you in?”

“Ravenclaw, of course. You're Gryffindor. I can see your tie.”

“Did you know Rubeus Hagrid?”

“*He* was a Gryffindor, too. They say his nasty monster killed me, but I don't remember seeing any monster except—” she gulps— “a pair of great yellow eyes.”

“It was a basilisk, and it wasn't his,” Percy says absently. He suddenly starts. “Myrtle, can you keep a secret?”

“Yes,” she says instantly. “Girls come to me all the time. I *never* tell their secrets. Olive used to tell mine at breakfast.”

“I'm, er, trying to investigate Hagrid's, um, expulsion,” Percy improvises. Stupid, he hadn't meant to let any secrets flow the other direction. “I don't know if the thing about the basilisk is true. It's just something I read somewhere. Don't repeat it, okay? I need the proper evidence.”

She peers at him. “Why are you trying to investigate Hagrid?”

This, he has an answer ready for. “Well, if he's a murderer, I don't exactly want him near us. If he's not, then he should be allowed to finish his education. Education is important. You know that.”

“Yes,” Myrtle says, wistfully. “When I first died, I went to all my classes. Just to torment Olive, you see, but then I found I missed it. I did the whole seven years. Professor Flitwick even let me take my NEWTs. Through him, of course.” She flashes him a conspiratorial grin and suddenly looks more alive. “I had to take them twice to get all Outstandings, but I finally did.”

Percy cannot believe he is smiling at a ghost—Moaning Myrtle of all ghosts—but he can't help it. He too would probably insist on taking his NEWTs if he was trapped as a ghost. “Quite right,” he says approvingly. “Good for you, Myrtle.”

“What's your name?”

“Percy. Nice to meet you. So you completed all seven years...did you ever meet a Greengrass? He's one of my, er, friends.” Landon Greengrass and Percy have begun partnering in Charms, but they have yet to exchange any friendly words save from discussions over proper pronunciation or wand movement, but Percy will take what he can get.

Myrtle shudders instantly. “Nasty boys, all of them. Thought they were so clever, but they were cruel. Cruel to girls and animals and professors and definitely to me. They thought my death was *funny*.”

Percy talks before tears can come. “Oh it's not funny, Myrtle, it's horrid. Anyway, his grandson is really quite nice. He's a Ravenclaw too, I'll, er, introduce you. Was his great grandfather also in Ravenclaw?”

Myrtle shakes her head and says scornfully, “Of course not. He was a Slytherin. They were all Slytherins: Greengrass and Malfoy and Avery and Nott and Riddle. All nasty, sneaky Slytherins.”

Percy is beginning to sweat. “I know a Nott, I think,” he says carefully. “And my dad hates Malfoy. Er, what about Riddle? I don't think I've met his descendents.”

Myrtle shudders again. “Nasty boy. Everyone loved him, perfect Head Boy Riddle. I caught him with this girl once, in the corridor. She was crying. I screamed at him and he ran away.”

Yes, Riddle would, wouldn't he? He had probably just killed Myrtle and was unnerved to see her. “He was Head Boy?”

“Everyone thought he was perfect, but I never liked him,” Myrtle continues spitefully. “Anyway, I don't think much happened with him after he graduated. I think he went to work at some shop. Some nasty shop in that nasty Alley that everyone told me never to go to. Borgin, something like that.”

“So much for being Head Boy,” Percy says, and his disdain is only half faked. Borgin and Burkes. Imagine.

He chats a bit with Myrtle and then bids his leave, promising to return. Despite himself, he enjoyed talking to her, once she seemed less likely to burst into tears.

***

Percy avoids Penny; it's far too strange to see her, eleven and skinny and pigtailed, and their relationship feels recent enough to Percy that he occasionally still misses her. He knows far too much about her to talk to her casually. Imagine if he accidentally mentioned her brother's name, or referenced a joke she does not yet get.

If he's being honest, he avoids most of his classmates, particularly the Muggleborns. So few of them are still alive and unharmed in his time. He sometimes thinks that his generation was hit the hardest by the war. They were still young, still reckless and foolish and idealistic. These Muggleborns did not know how to read the signs, not like the older ones. They did not have houses to disappear to, money stashed up. Neither did they have families to protect them like the younger ones, many of whom went quietly to primary school in their towns and pretended not to know a Kneazle from a housecat. No, Percy's classmates fought back, and many of them died. Seeing them at the beginning of their lives, knowing that their days were numbered—it's easier just to keep to himself.

And so he spends much of the year alone. He wanders when he can. Not at night; he won't risk a detention. But he enjoys walking the grounds as dusk begins to settle, when the rest of the brood is in the Great Hall for supper. He even sees Snape sometimes, skulking around the Forbidden Forest.

"I saw some Exploding Snapdragons a few metres back," he tells Snape one day as the sun streaks a brilliant blaze across the sky.

Snape pauses. He's holding a bag of what looks like thistles, which Percy eyes curiously. They're used most commonly for potions of protection.

"And am I to believe the words of an eleven year old boy?"

Percy shrugs. "I read a lot, sir."

Snape eyes him. "Perhaps you should read less and study more. Your potions leave much to be desired."

Percy is purposefully not excelling at Potions, though after that comment he begins to improve openly. After all, Snape did walk in the direction of the Exploding Snapdragons.

***

June 1988

Percy's first year ends. Bill graduates near the top of his class and then has an extremely dramatic breakup with a girlfriend that Percy doesn't remember at all from the original timeline. Charlie dances around a courtship with Nymphadora Tonks that comes to an abrupt end when she begins dating Belby, Slytherin Seeker and as close to a *fuck you* as Nymphadora can give to the Gryffindor Seeker while still refusing to speak to him. Percy watches Charlie watch Nymphadora watch Belby for nearly the entire ceremony and wonders what they fought about to bring about the end of what he vaguely recalls as a deep friendship.

Summer passes, too, lazily. Percy returns to the Burrow and is able to secure a small job at the village library sorting books. While the job is appropriately boring—he is, for all intents and purposes, a young child—it does net him a few extra Sickles per day. To his mum, he claims they are repaying him for his labour by allowing him extra loaning privileges in the village library. Since Percy is the only one to frequent said library, Molly does not question this.

(He has to bite down on a surge of resentment when she questions him. Why is it *wrong* to earn money, to have an early job, to learn discipline and responsibility? Why do his parents prefer they are proud and poor to practical and stable? Percy always was distrusted for his ambition, and it rankles him no less now than it did then).

Ginny, at seven, begins to display more signs of the strong personality she later grows into. Percy watches her one night sneak into the broom shed on tiny legs and wonders how he had never noticed her rebellious streak the first time. She and Ron begin to spend nearly every second of the day together. While they had always been close, they now disappear into the field behind the Burrow and return at the end of the day, caked with mud and giggling together.

Fred and George continue their nonsense. They hint at the chaos they will unleash upon Hogwarts in two years' time. Percy gives them a wide berth, largely for his own safety, though the occasional pang of guilt still troubles him.

Bill leaves after yet another dramatic argument with his parents, clutching his trunk and Flooing away with youthful declarations of independence. Percy wonders why nobody resents *him* for leaving his family. Percy at least had stayed in England.

Left to his own devices, Percy does what he does best. He re-reads the same books about the Dark Lord's rise to power, about James and Lily Potter, about the Fidelius Charm, about Albus Dumbledore. Arthur catches him with one of the books that he'd checked out, once, but seems to accept Percy's claim that it's for his History of Magic essay. The lack of progress is frustrating, but Percy is disciplined.

Perhaps it had been a mistake to twist back to eleven. Perhaps he should have skipped right to fifteen or sixteen. Percy had believed he'd need the extra years to prepare himself, which he still believes. He hadn't anticipated that his young age would be such an impediment when it came to obtaining information.

For instance, he knows that Tom Riddle worked at Borgin and Burke's. He has a suspicion that Riddle steals or buys something, but he has no way to tell. He can hardly access the Auror records or contact the owner of the shop. He's eleven, twelve in August.

He knows there is more advanced soul magic. He's learned enough about the various common applications to see the shape of the information that he's missing. Even Healing magic is barely covered in the accessible section of the Hogwarts library. Once again, however, he's eleven, and he can hardly ask anyone other than Professor McGonagall for access to the Restricted Section.

He can't leave Hogwarts, even to Hogsmeade. He can't owl-order books until he's made a bit more money. He can't become an Animagus without draining his magical core, and he can't practice advanced magic for the same reason.

All Percy can do is plan, and make to-do lists, and wait at least another year. All he can do is hope that when the time comes, he'll be able to act decisively and effectively.

But he *will* act. He has to. Otherwise all of this would have been for naught.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT 2023: This story has blown up, at least from my perspective -- I was expecting maybe 10 people to read this total, and we have way surpassed that. Super crazy. A few things for new readers:

1) I have been meaning to go back and edit some of the spelling / grammar errors but have honestly have not had the time. Feel free to point them out, I am not offended and periodically go back and fix them.

2) This story involves a Percy who is most commonly described as a "trainwreck." As a corollary, he thinks and does things that are idiotic and are not things that I necessarily agree with. However, he's meant to be someone who has good intentions, just someone who...is particularly susceptible to losing his way, and a big part of this story is exploring whether he will be able to fight his way out or succumb. I make no promises whether he succeeds or not, but he definitely tries, often with varying success.

3) This story probably has more and less interactions with the main characters of HP than you are imagining. In many ways, Percy gets really entangled with the plot in a major way and develops some strong relationships with some key characters, many unexpected. In other ways, he remains entirely separate. Again, trainwreck. Characters will dip in and out of Percy's life, particularly considering this whole thing spans about 12 years.

4) This is my first time writing....basically anything aside from some poetry and short stories. I have been part of the fanfiction community for a long time and I feel that people have started to be...meaner? You don't have to like my story and I do welcome constructive criticism (as you'll see from my author notes, I revised this story a TON based on everyone's comments and it really developed as a result), but if you just blindly hate it, please don't be mean about it. Reading comments of the "your story promised X and Y happened instead and this story would have been better if XYZ happened and I hate the choices you made and Percy is so awful I hated reading this and it was a waste of my time" variety is really demotivating, considering that writing is just a hobby that I do and nobody is forcing you to read it.

5) On the flip side, if you DO have constructive criticism or you liked the story or you thought it was at all interesting or you have your own ideas to share, please do! I try to respond to as many comments as I can, and some people have even reached out to me on Tumblr to chat. I feel like I've made some friends! So fun.

STYMIED

Chapter Notes

I have been smiling at my phone all week!! I honestly expected maybe one person to actually read the entire first chapter. Thank you to everyone who gave me kudos and bookmarked the story to read, it definitely was a huge motivating factor for me! And a huge thank you to everyone who commented. I actually added a scene in this chapter based off of one of your comments.

Year 2 is pretty short, so I will try and clean up Year 3 to post it soon. Let me know what you think! (Also, my formatting seems to change when I copy from Google Drive to ao3, so please don't be shy to point out if something seems off. For instance, ao3 adds a space after words that are italicized and immediately followed by punctuation, which is driving me crazy).

CHAPTER TWO: STYMIED

1988-1989 (Percy is 12 & 25, Harry is 8, Bill has graduated and Charlie is a sixth year).

Summer 1988

His mother pulls him aside after their annual trip to Diagon Alley. Percy, who has successfully managed to purchase a few questionable texts instead of his textbooks when Fred and George, allowed to tag along only due to the conspicuous absence of Bill, make a gigantic mess in the store, is feeling rather pleased with himself. He'd widened his eyes at the cashier and explained that he wanted the books on Dark Magic for *his curse breaking older brother who was moving to Egypt!* and the wizard had immediately stopped questioning it.

Percy wonders why the hat didn't place him in Slytherin. He clearly has the cunning for it.

He does not feel particularly worried that he will arrive for his second year with only half of the required books, based on what he could scrounge up from Bill and Charlie's rooms. His roommate Alexander will likely purchase a whole set of brand new books and then promptly discard them in the corner of the dorm, never to be opened until the last week, so Percy hardly sees why he ought to buy a duplicate set.

Regardless, he's feeling cheerful when his mother ceremoniously presents him with a second hand set of paints and a bound book. "Your father and I noticed you've been spending quite a bit of time reading about painting," she says, her eyes bright. "We thought you might want to join the Painting Club at Hogwarts this year. I was in it, you know."

Percy blinks at her. He hadn't known that, actually. Or had McGonagall mentioned it? He tries to remember, but he does not have the mental capacity to remember every single conversation he's ever had, so if it isn't relevant to the task at hand, he often lets the memory dissolve into the wind. Thus, he takes the paints with some surprise but manages a genuinely warm smile of thanks. "I'll think about it," he says. "Er, thank you, Mother."

Her smile is warmer than his, and Percy looks down at the paints. He'd only read so many books on it this summer because he found the subject rather interesting—it turns out that any portrait could be animated, and even a picture if the conditions were right, but somehow the soul had to be imitated, and that was a fiendishly difficult thing to do and so easier if done during the painting itself—but he knew no gift in the Weasley household was frivolous. Perhaps he should try it.

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The next day, his father drops Percy and Charlie off at King's Cross on the way to work, the Portkey a crumbling brick. Absently, Percy wonders about this. If the Portkey is an object that breaks into pieces, is each piece also a Portkey? What constitutes the essential piece?

Regardless of the magical theory, the brick deposits them and a cloud of red-brown dust onto Platform 9 3/4. Coughing, Arthur waves his wand and dispels the debris, though Percy's shoes remain caked in clay. Perhaps his father's spell was not specific enough?

"Now, boys, be good," Arthur says, as he does every term, and gives them each individual hugs. He's a good father, Percy reflects as he receives his. It isn't his fault that he is rather ill-equipped to deal with the upcoming war, too gentle to fight and yet too proud to abandon his convictions.

He catches Percy's arm before he turns away. Charlie gives him a sympathetic look and steps away, hailed immediately by a few of his friends. "Perce, one last thing. Professor McGonagall wrote to us last term and mentioned that you're having a bit of trouble making friends."

Percy sniffs in response. His mother has brought this up repeatedly and pointedly over the last year, but he'd rather hoped his father would let it drop.

"I know it's difficult for you," Arthur continues. "You're—different from a lot of your peers, I expect. Smarter than them, that's for sure." He attempts a joke. "These past few years especially, I often expect that I'm talking to a full grown man!"

Oh, Merlin. "Father," he immediately protests. "I have friends, and regardless, I'm doing very well in my classes—"

His father cuts him off gently. "Yes, Perce, your mum and I are very proud. And soon, hopefully, your classmates will catch up to you. We don't want you to be lonely, though, son. Classes aren't everything and Hogwarts should be the best times of your life. It's okay to have a little fun."

Percy snorts. He supposes that Hogwarts was the best time in his life, if only because he graduated into a war and then into grief. “Yes, Father,” he murmurs, and turns to go.

This time, the man doesn’t stop him. Percy boards the train, feeling rather morose. He supposes he shan’t have very many friends in this timeline, either, for he can’t prevent himself from aging with his peers. They will always have a decade gap between them.

Maybe he'll make more of an effort this term, if only to get his parents off his back. With Bill in Egypt, more of the attention falls to Percy, though that is countered by the younger brood aging ominously.

When he sees Landon Greengrass sitting alone in a compartment reading a book, Percy spends a minute adjusting his glasses before knocking politely. Landon has glasses too, which is odd for a son of a large and prosperous family. His parents most definitely could afford the vision correcting potion that his mother had refused to purchase for Percy in the last timeline, even as a gift for his seventeenth birthday. (Percy had argued he would have prefer the potion over whatever watch his parents would be able to scrounge up, which had not been particularly convincing. Percy had always wondered if this attempt was responsible both for the rather meagre watch he'd been presented with and for the purchase of Hermes. Perhaps in this timeline, he'll receive something different).

"Weasley," Landon greets him neutrally. They have never interacted outside of Charms. Percy has to fight the urge to apologise and then flee.

"Percy," he introduces himself in what is hopefully a friendly manner. Even at a mental age of twenty five, somehow this never gets easier.

"Landon. Er, looking for a spot? You can sit—let me move my things." Landon shifts awkwardly, his unconscious poise suddenly disappearing.

Percy sits opposite. For lack of anything to say, he nods at the book. "What are you reading?"

"About the Founders," Landon says somewhat eagerly, showing the title. "My father was telling me about the lost diadem of Ravenclaw. It's a myth, of course, but all myths have a basis in fact."

Percy actually agrees with this point. "I wouldn't be surprised if she did have an enchanted diadem. It's a bit like the Sorting Hat, but more dignified."

"The Sorting Hat, of *course*," his new friend says, digging for his quill. "Honestly, sometimes I think I'm a bit of an idiot. Can you believe I forgot about the Hat? I listed Gryffindor's sword, but I haven't reached his section yet."

"I also forget the Hat belonged to Gryffindor," Percy says excusingly. The Sword, he knows is real—all attendees of the Battle of Hogwarts will forever remember Neville Longbottom improbably emerging with the Sword of Gryffindor, only to slay the Dark Lord’s pet snake. Heroic, he supposes, but rather ill-conceived, unless Neville was just angling for an impressive way to commit suicide. Gryffindors and their futile devotion to bravery. "What are the other objects?"

Landon flips through the book. "Slytherin's reckoned to have all sorts of things," he says, skimming the chapter. "Er, there's the Death Stick, whatever that is, although the book says there's some contention over who's it was; the Chamber of Secrets apparently is some secret chamber in Hogwarts that has his *library*, I'd pay to see that; there's another crown-like thing here, see; some other jewellery…dunno why he has so much jewellery. Was he married, do you reckon?"

"Must have been. And Hufflepuff?"

More furious flipping through the book. Percy resists the urge to tell him to treat his books with care. Lord Greengrass will just send Landon a new one if he ruins it. Molly Weasley would murder any older Weasley sibling that needlessly ruined a book that, hopefully, a younger Weasley can use the following year. "*More* jewellery, dear Merlin. Some protective amulets, it says warding was the Hufflepuff speciality. Oh, look, this goblet was supposed to be magical. Eternal food, I think." He turns the book and shows Percy a picture of a small, glimmering cup. "Some fellow claims it was stolen, but the book seems to doubt it was Hufflepuff's at all. Much less the eternal food and potions."

"May I borrow that book when you're finished with it?" Percy inquires politely. His mind is buzzing. If not one but two of Gryffindor's objects exist—and Slytherin's Chamber of Secrets—then the probability of the other objects existing is rather high.

Protective amulets, goblets that produce potions, a diadem that brings knowledge—he could use these things. He could sell them for the money he needs or use them for his own gain. They're probably in Hogwarts, too. Percy just needs to find the right entrance or password.

Landon eyes him speculatively and flushes slightly. "I'm, er, hunting for them. Just as a project. I know it's completely ridiculous, and they're all totally made up, but I thought it might be...fun." This last ends rather weakly.

"It does sound fun," Percy says instantly, weighing the merit of a second year partner. He doubts Landon may have much luck, but he may find resources that Percy can use to his own advantage. "We could do it together. If you like."

"I would like that," Landon says. When he straightens, the Greengrass is back in his spine. "First we ought to finish this book."

They spend the rest of the train ride making a list of all possible and suspected Founders Objects. In the meantime, Percy makes a note to look up one Hepiziah Smith.

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Oliver signs up for the Quidditch team tryouts immediately, his name at the top of the parchment, and then promptly disappears to the Pitch clutching his new broom. His other roommates are friendly enough, exchanging pleasantries as they unpack their things. Percy

itches to go to the library, but not even he can argue that he has work to do on the very first day.

Professor McGonagall greets him warmly while passing out timetables and asks him to stay after class to confirm that his lessons will begin the following week.

"Do think about Potions as well," she says as he turns to go. "I believe you can handle the challenge, although I will remind you that you ought to find an activity to join." The *or friends to spend time with* is left unsaid.

Mood suddenly soured, he sulks through his first few classes. Why must everyone constantly criticise him for lacking friends instead of criticising the candidates for lacking any redeeming qualities?

He skips supper and heads to the library, where Madam Pince eyes him with a beady glare.

"Secured your pass to the Restricted Section yet?"

Percy grimances. "Not yet, Madam Pince."

"Probably for the better," she says, returning her attention to the large tome in front of her. "Can't imagine why a second year would need some of those books."

Percy takes his usual spot in the recesses of the library—nobody ever frequents the section on magical construction techniques—but he cannot shake the feeling that Madam Pince is watching to see what he reads.

Percy knows a duplication spell for books, although typically books are charmed to prevent permanent copies. Most are charmed to prevent the attempt, too. Would it be more subtle to stay in the library without checking the books out on record, or to check them out but read them elsewhere, or to attempt the duplication spell?

For now, he reads them uneasily in the library, but the need for secrecy weighs on his mind.

Over the weekend, Percy strikes.

He casts a powerful Disillusionment Charm over himself (verbally, unfortunately; wordless magic is still giving him trouble) and creeps out of bed once all of his roommates are asleep. The Common Room is empty, the fires dwindling. He makes his silent and lonely way down the corridors—so different at night, so cold, it's nothing like patrolling with a partner and a lantern—until he reaches the library.

The first thing Percy tries does not work. He takes out Bill's Head Boy badge, left carelessly in his room. He lays it on the ward stone and concentrates, filling his mind with memories of his own tenure of Head Boy, the break in of Sirius Black, his sense of overwhelming responsibility. The ward stone flares and seems to consider it before it subsides without unlocking.

Fine. He smears a bit of his blood on the ward stone, attempting to invoke his right as a Hogwarts graduate. This is a bit Dark, all things considered, but Percy has a suspicion it

would work. The Trace is confused by him; his attempts at wandless magic do not set off the Trace, though wand-magic does. Something about his magic, his blood, retains the memory of his true age. It’s something to consider during his limited free time: why does he still struggle with a weak magical core, yet his body knows somehow that he is older than he seems?

He feels the buzz of acceptance that will allow him not only to enter, which requires only ducking under the rope, but to take out books without activating their ancient protection charms.

He works quickly. He takes a selection of relevant books, many of the titles previously vetted by his perusal of the catalogue. A few on soul magic; a few primers on the Dark Arts; a slim volume on Occlumency; *Moste Potente Potions*; and a couple advanced Transfiguration and Charms texts. He shrinks them and slips them into his bookbag.

The next part of his plan is the risky part. Percy holds his breath as he gingerly exits the Restricted Section. No screams. He then walks over to Madam Pince's record book.

With a neat bit of magic, Percy records the books as being taken out by one Ignatius P.

He knows for a fact that Madam Pince does not know all of the students' names. He also knows from years of experience that she's not liable to actually check the shelves until her charms warn her of a disturbance. Hopefully recording them in the book will prevent any disturbance from being triggered.

None of the Weasleys’ middle names are legally given, a strange family tradition that now works in his favour. Nobody will know that Ignatius P, short for Prewett, is an alias for Percy Weasley.

"I'm sorry," Percy mouths to the library as he hurries away, his heart beating. He does not enjoy desecrating holy spaces, and the Hogwarts library is as holy of a space as any he’s encountered.

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Moaning Myrtle purses her lips as she stares at him, considering his words.

Percy tries not to fidget. His younger brother brewed illegal Polyjuice in this bathroom, with nobody the wiser. He doesn't think his proposition is unreasonable.

"Fine," she says after a prolonged pause. "But in exchange for keeping your secret, you tell me interesting things that you read. In exchange for keeping other people out, you promise to come at least once a week."

These are acceptable terms. Percy is once again struck by the uncomfortable feeling that he is not dissimilar to Myrtle. "Agreed."

Her entire demeanour changes and she swoops down with excitement. "What are we reading first?"

Percy begins with the least damning. "Occlumency," he says, showing her the title. "Protection of the mind."

She deflates some. "That's boring," the ghost complains. "Can't you read that on your own time?"

"Next time I'll bring a different book," Percy promises. "We can learn more about ghosts, or Landon and I are researching the Founder's Objects. But I need to practise Occlumency for at least fifteen minutes every day to achieve proficiency within the next few years."

Myrtle gives an exaggerated sign and perches on the corner of the sink. "Begin, if you must," she says imperiously, and Percy opens to the first chapter.

Occlumency is not soul magic. It is magic of the mind, he and Myrtle learn as they read together. The idea is to construct mental walls, infused with magic, in order to protect it from intrusion. The hardest part, the introduction cautions, is learning to think of one's mind as a physical entity requiring protection. To begin, one has to meditate, attempting to visualise the steady state of the mind.

Myrtle and Percy exchange looks when they get to the first exercise. Their mutual scepticism makes Percy's lips quirk, and he looks back at the book hastily. He knows Occlumency is a real magic, if only because Legilimency is a very real threat. Magic, he's finding, is balanced. If something can be hurt, it can be healed. If something can be attacked, it can be protected.

"We set a timer for five minutes and focus on our breathing," Percy summarises. "We focus on our initial, instinctive conception of our minds. Do we picture a landscape? How large? Are there colours? Objects?"

"I suppose," Myrtle says doubtfully. She arranges herself to sit cross legged, her translucent legs shifting under her ghostly dress.

Percy looks around him in some distaste and pulls out his wand. He takes a small chair out of his bag and restores it to its original size. That much, at least, he'd planned ahead. He then casts a few cleaning charms for good measure, ending with an air freshening smell.

He sits carefully on the chair and sets a timer with his wand. Then, closing the book, he tries to visualise his own mind.

Five minutes is desperately long, and Percy considers himself a disciplined individual. He thinks of his mind as a grey and endless landscape, stretching in front of him forever. He's surprised to note a few minutes in that he perceives a horizon, some sort of line when the dark grey behind his eyes switches subtly in colour. He’s disappointed; he’d been hoping for a mind palace, something grand and elegant.

His wand buzzes and he opens his eyes. Myrtle clearly had given up a few minutes ago, as she is hovering just a few feet away, peering at him through her thick translucent glasses.

(Muggleborn, he supposes; and likely not wealthy either).

"Maybe ghosts don't have minds," she suggests. "I couldn't see anything."

"Just grey," he agrees, opening the book again. "Now we're supposed to think about what physical spaces make us feel safe and make a list."

Somehow they end up making a list together, Myrtle insisting he write for them both. Her list is much longer: various bathrooms and pipes and even the bottom of the Great Lake. His is shorter: his bedroom in the Burrow, the library, the small knoll of trees on the back path surrounding the castle.

"Our homework until we meet again is to practise visualising these spaces until we can see them when we close our eyes," Percy dictates, finally rising from the chair. "Next time I'll bring a book on ghosts, and we can read more into it."

Myrtle waves at him quite cheerfully as he shrinks his chair down again and stows it in the bag. She's really quite misunderstood, he reflects as he walks away. Hardly weepy at all.

***

Dear Fred, George, Ron, and Ginny,

I hope everything is going well at home. Hogwarts is the usual. I must begin thinking of what classes I want to take next year for my third year electives.

I've been watching Charlie at Quidditch. He really can fly! Are any of you thinking of joining the Quidditch team? I imagine you all would be very good players. Maybe you should practice now.

I have been writing with Bill. He is really enjoying Egypt. Maybe we will get to go visit him in a few years time.

Fred, George, you will both be at Hogwarts next year. I recommend spending the next few months working your way through some books. I recommend Wormwood's Basic Primer of Magic. I think Bill has a copy in his room.

Ron, I expect to see you improved at chess when I am home for winter holiday.

Ginny, I hope all is well and the boys are not giving you too much trouble.

Love,

Percy

***

October 1988

Landon skeptically accompanies Percy to the next meeting of the Painting Club. Stepping into the wide, sunny classroom, Percy notes with some trepidation the soft buzz of conversation, the groups of students gathered around small circular tables, and the soft classical music playing from the enchanted radio in the corner. The effect is rather pleasant, actually, and he tries to relax his shoulders as he follows Landon to the front of the room, where Flitwick, the faculty sponsor, is cheerfully exchanging supplies for the club dues.

(Landon drops a large Galleon carelessly on the desk in exchange for several types of paints, a few enchanted canvases, and some smoky charcoal. Percy, his ears burning, has only a silver Sickle, which nets him just the charcoal and a book of plain, Muggle canvas paper).

He finds to his surprise that he enjoys himself. Far from being the well-oiled machine of the Chess Club, this organisation seems more content to leave its members to their own devices. Percy spends most of the session flipping through the book of old student examples, not wanting to waste his meagre supplies without talent. He comes across a painting of his father, aged seventeen, looking rather like Charlie. He's tinkering with something just out of the frame, and just as Percy moves to set the painting down, peers up with a grin.

Looking around, he slides it out of the book for his own keeping. It's strange to think of his parents as young Hogwarts students, also graduating into a war. It hits Percy how truly generational the war was—sons carrying on the legacy of their fathers, daughters fighting the battles of their mothers.

"Too afraid to actually draw something, are we?" Landon surprises him from behind, and Percy can't quite control a flinch.

"Now that I'm faced with the prospect of being bad at it, I may be experiencing some reserve," Percy admits. Percy does not do things that he is *bad* at, as a general principle. Percy has enough self-awareness to recognise this trait in himself. (When he is feeling charitable, he tells himself that he has a plethora of skills that he is already proficient in to cultivate; when he is feeling self-flagatory, he muses that his lack of discipline and desire to avoid embarrassment caused many of the issues in his life).

Landon flourishes his work, a small sketch of a fruit bowl set up at the opposite end of the table. "Hector and Daphne are giving lessons," he says, pointing out two older students. "It's funny, but I think that we're supposed to learn things in this club."

Percy scowls half heartedly at Landon's teasing. "You mean you didn't sprout from the womb fully formed?"

"Hard to believe, but I did not," Landon says self-importantly. "Go on, see if you can draw some fruit. I'm working on the banana."

"Curvature is rather important," Percy agrees, and with some hesitation he goes to see if he can draw some fruit.

***

Drawing is surprisingly enjoyable, he soon finds. After the initial awkwardness of being taught the fundamentals by two fifteen year old Hufflepuffs, Percy shuts himself up in Myrtle's bathroom—the interior to which he has since added a small desk—and practices relentlessly. He bans her from watching, and she takes the time to swoop around the rest of the castle and collect gossip, returning intermittently to report.

"The Fat Lady is mad at Violet again," the ghost says on a dreary October afternoon, startling Percy from his detailed rendering of the sink. "Do you think it's *boring* to be a painting?"

"Is it boring to be a ghost?" Percy asks, carefully shading in the little snakes on the faucets.

Myrtle considers this with some aplomb. "Not really, but I do have to say, you've made it a bit less boring."

Percy looks up to briefly grin at her. Who would have thought his only friend in the entire castle would be a fifty year old ghost?

"Although the Occlumency books are horrid, and you won't show me your drawings," Myrtle continues with a pout. "I want to read more about ghosts and Charms and Ravenclaw."

"I'm rather busy, you know," Percy says instead of explaining. "Professor McGonagall says if I exceed expectations, she'll start Animagus lessons in my fourth year."

"That's ever so far away," Myrtle moans theatrically. She flops, insofar as a ghost can flop, on the pipes in front of Percy. He looks up as the pipes moan threateningly and tugs his paper away from the vulnerable edge of the desk. "Let's do something fun *now*."

"Myrtle, having discipline is important. We can't give into our whims; how else will we achieve our goals? We must turn our attention to what requires our attention."

With that impressive admonition given, Percy turns his attention back to his drawing.

Myrtle rolls her eyes, a motion that turns her entire body. "Fine," she says huffily. "Stay here and *draw*. I'm going to talk to Anthony. He's actually *interesting*."

Once she leaves, however, Percy sighs and puts down his pencil. He does like drawing and the quiet attention it requires, but he can't help feeling like he isn't following his own instructions.

Percy is not unused to having his goals stymied by forces out of his control, typically those with red hair. But this endless *waiting* is driving him increasingly mad. He wants to do

something, but he just cannot figure out what next to do.

Sometimes, when he cannot sleep, Percy stares at the dark red hangings above his bed and bitterly chastises himself for the *idiocy* it had required to send himself back in time without more of a clear plan. He'd thought, idiotically, that the Hogwarts library would have the resources that he would need, but he hadn't thought to *confirm* his assumption, assuming instead that he wouldn't be able to access the library after graduating. (Not to mention, the thought of returning to Hogwarts, to walking past the spot where Fred had died—he couldn't stomach it, not until his sins were wiped clean by his new life). He'd spent so much effort researching the bloody time ritual that he hadn't done very much more than write out a comprehensive timeline of the Dark Lord's rise, based on interviews and conversations with Harry and his siblings.

Perhaps it had not been idiocy that landed him in this position, stymied at all turns, but rather arrogance, which is a difficult pill to swallow, and keeps him awake late into the night more than once.

***

Snape catches him one day coming out of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

"An emergency, Mr. Weasley?" His professor inquires silkily. "Could not make it to the men's lavatory at the end of the hall?"

Percy stops, flushing red. "I was interviewing Myrtle," he says stiffly.

Snape purses his lips together. "Ghosts are not substitutes for friends, Mr. Weasley."

There are several things Percy could respond to this, from offensive to defensive, but in the end he simply bows his head. "Perhaps, but they make for interesting company nevertheless."

Snape inclines his head in acknowledgement of the point. "If you are bored, Mr. Weasley, perhaps you ought to try your hand at your studies. Your performance in Potions is rote and uninspired."

There are several more things Percy would like to say to this, none of them complimentary. Snape waits, anticipating an angry reply, but when nothing comes he seems to give the smallest of shrugs. "I am interested to see one Weasley has learned to hold his tongue," he says instead. "Good day, Mr. Weasley. Give the ghost my regards."

Percy burns at the injustice of this as he walks away. Inside the Common Room, he sees the usual smattering of his yearmates huddled around the Gobstones board, but Percy has but two robes to his name and cannot risk one on his skill at the game. There are only so many times a house elf can wash a stain out of cloth before it degrades.

His room is empty, save for Henry muttering over his Transfiguration incantations.

"Hello, Henry," Percy tries, uncomfortably aware of the stiffness of his manner.

Henry looks up. "Er, hello, Percy. Tired of the Gobstones game?"

Percy instinctively looks at the frayed ends of his robes and then stiffens. "Not really my purview, Gobstones."

"What is your purview?" Henry asks guilelessly. "Only, I know you don't quite like Quidditch, and you don't play Gobstones or Exploding Snap."

"Chess, I suppose," says Percy, though he avoids playing chess with anyone of his own physical age. Twelve year olds do not put up much of a fight.

Henry wrinkles his nose. As a wealthy heir, he undoubtedly has been schooled in the art of chess. Percy wishes *he* did not have to be good at chess, that he had not studied it deliberately with his career prospects in mind, that he could take his chess tutelage for granted. Many a deal has been brokered over the violent massacre of a Wizarding chess board. "I suppose," Henry says doubtfully. "I can play with you sometime, if you'd like."

The condescension of this offer rankles Percy, and he smiles tightly. "I suppose," he says in the same doubtful tone, and Henry's eyebrows furrow slightly.

Percy had been considering offering his help on Henry's Transfiguration assignment, but instead he turns and flees the room.

Bereft of Myrtle, bereft of the sanctuary of his room—Percy has nowhere to go, and he walks the grounds aimlessly.

He doesn't belong here, any more than he did the first time. The only thing he likes about Hogwarts sometimes is Hogwarts itself, the way every spire of the castle sparks with magic, the serenity of the large lake, the gentle susurrations of the trees dotting the grounds. Perhaps this had been a mistake, all of it.

What had Tom felt about Hogwarts? Had he too been bored by his peers, trapped by his lack of prospects, infuriated by a system that does not recognise accomplishment in one unlikely to succeed? Or had those boys crowding his feet been genuine friends, and he had been like the rest, weaving himself into the social fabric with ease?

Percy chooses to believe Tom felt the same, even as the head in the front of the crowd. They were not his friends, as adoring as their gazes may be.

(Although, what does it say that Percy is so lonely that he chooses the Dark Lord to identify with, of all people? Not to mention he will come up short if he measures himself against Tom. Tom at least had followers, acclaim. Percy couldn't lead his twelve year old peers even if he tried.

Perhaps he should try).

***

November 1988

Cursed books are common. Even books that respond back are not unheard of; every Weasley knows by heart the warning to never trust something if you don't know where it keeps its brain.

Books that *possess* are rare.

Possession in general is rather rare. Percy reads up on the Imperius Curse, but even that isn't true possession. That is a question of magical will, of dominance. (Dominance of what, he wonders. Souls? Magical ability? Stubbornness? The book does not say, but he knows Harry Potter famously can throw off the Imperius. It's possible, but why?)

True possession involves a merging of two people. In the Imperius Curse, one person merely enchants the other. When someone is possessed, the possessor lives in their head, albeit marginally. They are a presence, discrete.

If somebody can possess another person without losing themselves, it implies that whatever constitutes their sense of self can be divided.

Split.

Percy raises his head from the book. Had all these answers been there before? Was it always true that looking underneath the surface of these spells uncovers logical chains that reveal fundamental truths? It's all logic, every last bit of it. If one can accept a series of truths about how magic works, then all inferred conclusions that follow logically must also be true.

The soul is like the mind, like magic: it possesses a duality, a tangibility and intangibility simultaneously. The soul can be split and destroyed and healed, but it also can't be seen unless it is trapped in a vessel. In the same way, every wizard knows what his magic feels like, but he can't visualise it until it is channelled into a spell. It's the same with the mind, though Percy is struggling heavily with the meditation exercises. It can't be seen until it takes a physical form.

Something about this feels significant, but to his frustration he can't quite verbalise it.

What splits the soul? First he thinks of magic. Spells "split" magic, insofar as they channel the magic into light and acceleration and weight. Magic is neither created nor destroyed; it only changes form. Every student who passes OWL level Charms can assert that with confidence. The incantation, the movement, the physical wand—they all serve to mould that spark of magic into something tangible. Building the magical core is not creating new magic, but rather challenging the body to better use the magic that inherently runs through the veins of every wizard. Magical strength is a feat of will and discipline rather than ability.

What splits the mind? What causes him to create defences? For another to “read” his mind, his mind must have a physical element that can be accessed.

Magic, he supposes. The Legilemincy spell must force his mind to take on a physical cast. Isn't that what he's doing with his Occlumency practice? He's visualising a representation of his mind and reinforcing it with magic. He's creating his own physical cast and setting the rules, so to speak.

So what causes a soul to split?

Dark Magic, maybe. Perhaps it is the Dark Arts that forces the soul to take on a physical form. That could be the magic of the Dementors. Maybe the magic of Patroni is that they create the physical form first, same as Occlumency. What can be harmed can also be healed.

Death, maybe. What creates ghosts? Death. It's impossible to have a portrait of a live human. It's impossible to possess a dead one.

Percy lays down his quill and sighs, overwhelmed suddenly by these questions of life and death and souls. They aren't covered, usually. He's never had to think about them before.

After a second, he shakes his head and stands. He has a few books on Dark Arts that he's been avoiding, not ready to delve into the foul unknown. Now, it looks like he has no choice.

***

Landon and Percy look dubiously at the statue of Rowena Ravenclaw in the Ravenclaw Common Room.

"It sort of looks like the picture," Landon says, holding the book open.

"It's certainly a crown," Percy agrees. The statue has a thin and delicate band around her head, but in stone it looks rather unimpressive. "Where do you think she got it?"

"Goblin made, I'd imagine," Landon says with the dismissive attitude of someone whose family certainly owns at least one goblin made heirloom. Percy's family only has Auntie Muriel's alleged goblin tiara.

(Well. There's an idea).

Percy looks around the room, tastefully decorated in blue and silver. He's been in it a few times with Penny, but he'd never surveyed its art too carefully. He must say that he quite prefers the Ravenclaw Common Room to Gryffindor's. It is far less stuffy and far less crowded, with a focus more toward tables and study nooks rather than the squashy couches that are such a hit with Percy's housemates. There certainly isn't a disruptive game of Gobstones interrupting the afternoon. "Are there any other portraits or statues?"

"Not that I know of," Landon reports. "I'll ask around. Maybe the diadem is just a myth, then. I still think jewellery is our best option."

"Jewellery is so common," Percy protests. "How many diadems could there be? If it existed, there would be traces of it. Protective amulets and fancy necklaces—there must be dozens, hundreds of those."

Landon concedes this point with a shrug. "Let's try Gryffindor," he says instead. "Have you got a statue?"

"Unfortunately, no." He pauses, trying to think. The hunt for Founder's Objects has, admittedly, been more of a ploy to befriend Landon than something that is actually on the forefront of Percy's mind, but he supposes he ought to act now if he does not want Landon to get bored of it…and, potentially, of him. "We haven't got anything of Gryffindor's in our Common Room."

"You must have the Sorting Hat."

Percy shakes his head. "That's in Dumbledore's office."

There's another idea.

***

He acts on Auntie Muriel first.

His letter is long and complimentary and politely inquires after her health. He expresses an interest in cataloguing the Prewett family heirlooms, wanting to make a record for future generations. As there are very few Prewett family heirlooms that he knows of, he hopes she brings up the tiara without his having to be more explicit.

She takes the bait and offers to show him around the Prewett family vault over Christmas, while generally insulting his upbringing and mother and sense of hygiene.

Perfect.

He doesn't know how to get to the Sorting Hat without communicating with Dumbledore, so he leaves that to Landon. He figures twelve year old, wealthy Landon will be able to charm Dumbledore into allowing him a turn under the Hat. Anyway, after his last brush with the object, Percy has no interest in being called desperate again.

***

In his free time, he looks idly into magical portraiture, still interested by the comment Myrtle made the previous year about *lingering*. Something, clearly, enables the portraits to speak and move and have memory, both of their past lives and of their portrait-lives. Whether it is soul magic is debatable, but it is magic nevertheless, and Percy itches with the desire to understand. He discovers to his dismay that the procedure involves a potion that is far beyond his present ability. Percy never had a knack for Potions, and repeating the curriculum has thus failed to provide him with any additional insights.

"Rotten luck," says Margaret, the seventh year heading the Painting Club, peering over his shoulder. "That looks rather complicated, and I'm pants at Potions."

Percy starts and looks up from the parchment. He'd mailed all sorts of painters, asking for the instructions, and one had finally responded to him. "Nobody here studies portraiture, correct?"

Margaret shakes her head. "I asked Professor Flitwick about it, last time you mentioned you were interested in it," she says. "Hogwarts hasn't had an official portrait artist for many years. Your best bet is Snape."

Percy frowns but has to admit that she's correct. For starters, he can't afford half of the things on the list, but he may be able to swing that as an official school project. Even if he has access to the ingredients, his seven years of Potions is enough to give him an uneasy feeling about completing the potion on its own. Ashwinder eggs? Doxy venom? Explosive ingredients.

Margaret also has been reading the recipe and she gasps as she gets to the end. "Look at this, Percy," she says, pointing to the bottom. "*A representative sample of the person to be enshrined.* That sounds rather Dark."

"A representative sample?" Percy repeats, his eyebrows furrowing. "Like hair? Blood?"

"You definitely should talk to Professor Snape," Margaret says, with a sudden intensity. "Listen, Percy. You're a second year and so I doubt you've gotten far in Portions yet, but this type of thing can be dangerous. I reckon Snape won't even let you start working on it for a few years, but he could expel you if you work on it alone. Potions that use, er, *samples of people* are classified Dark by the Ministry."

This Percy knows all too well. His time spent reviewing cauldron bottoms had been informative in many ways. But portraiture can't be a Dark Art. The hundreds of portraits dotting Hogwarts' castle would hardly be allowed if portraits could be dangerous.

***

December 1988

He visits Hagrid during the Hufflepuff-Ravenclaw Quidditch match, taking the trail to his hut while the cheers of the stands echo behind him. He hunches into his coat, the biting fall wind harsh against his reedy body.

Exercise, he adds to the list. He isn't enjoying being prepubescent again, his legs nearly as skinny as his arms. To be fair, he'd never been what anyone would call *muscular*, but he had at least filled into his tall frame by the time he hit twenty. Maybe he can run around the lake or something. Carry more books in his bag?

He carefully avoids the crops towering over his head—he can't imagine what kind of grubs feed off vegetables the size of a horse—and knocks briskly at Hagrid's door.

Hagrid pulls it open with a crash. His dog launches a disgusting and unprovoked attack on the hem of Percy's robes. He's one second away from a stinging hex when Hagrid pulls the mutt away with a large hand.

"Something wrong, lad?"

Percy mutters a small cleaning charm to rid himself of drool. He'd bin these robes if he had money for another set. "Percy Weasley, sir," he introduces himself, sticking out a hand.

Hagrid takes it gingerly. "Not Charlie's brother, are you?"

Percy nods. It occurs to him too late that he could have invited Charlie along for this meeting, at least to have an excuse to drop in, though Charlie would never miss a game. "Yes, sir. His next youngest. I'm in my second year."

"Come in and have some tea, lad, it's right chilly outside. A friend of Charlie's is a friend of mine."

Percy follows him into the cabin, looking around the small hut with some interest. It's a bit appalling, actually, that Hogwarts' only groundskeeper is forced to live in such a ridiculous hut. "Hagrid, why don't you live in the castle?"

Hagrid sets two cups on the ramshackle table, lifting sugar cubes from a bowl the size of Percy's head. "I don't much like the castle, to be honest," he admits. "Not Hogwarts, say—I love Hogwarts, and I always will. But why would I want to be inside when I could live here, next to the forest and all its beauties? Fang would go crazy, too."

Percy eyes Fang with some trepidation and accepts his tea. "Were you a student once?"

Hagrid gives him a beady look. "What's it to you?"

"I'm just trying to learn more about Hogwarts," Percy says, falling back on his pre-established lie. "My friend Landon and I are trying to put together an investigation of Hogwarts and its mysteries. Right now, we're researching the Founders." He looks up at Hagrid with an expression he hopes is likeable. Already he's spoken more to Hagrid than he had in seven years of schooling. "I figured, who better to know the secrets of the castle than

the groundskeeper? Charlie is always telling me you know everything there is to know about Hogwarts."

Hagrid looks faintly pleased. "Truth is, there's not many that know more about Hogwarts than me," he admits. "Not its history, I suppose; I ain't got much of a head for dates and facts, things like that. But I know this castle well. I've been here for just about fifty years."

"Fifty years! Why, you must have known Myrtle. Moaning Myrtle, that is."

Hagrid squints at Percy, who continues to attempt to look trustworthy and sincere. It's a difficult task. "How do you know Myrtle?"

"We're friends," Percy manages to say without too much self-awareness of how ridiculous that statement is. "We read books together. Well, I read them to her, but still. She's quite intelligent, you know."

"Not many know," Hagrid says. He takes a giant swig from his mug and sets it down on the table with a minor crash. "I did know Myrtle, as a matter of fact. We were in school together. I, er, didn't finish all seven years."

"Why not?"

"No reason, just some complications," Hagrid says hastily. "A misunderstanding. Dumbledore's a fine fellow, he sorted it all out. Let me stay on as a gamekeeper, you know. I've been here ever since."

Percy senses weakness and pounces. "Were you here when Myrtle died? I promised her that if I found anything regarding her death, I'd let her know. She doesn't remember it, you know. Just a pair of great big yellow eyes."

Hagrid's eyes widen. "1945 was my last year," he says, his accent thickening as he seems to forget Percy. "I was just a mite, just thirteen. They thought it was me—thought it was Aragog. But it couldn't have been Aragog. He wouldn't hurt nobody, and he didn't have the yellow eyes."

"What does?"

"Oh, a lot," Hagrid waves his hand to encompass the entire animal kingdom. "Owls, coyotes, some cats. Wolves. Some snakes, some species of dragon. Werewolves typically have yellow eyes too, but it wasn't a full moon, and anyway, there weren't no werewolves here, no matter what Riddle said. He said I raised them under my bed—clearly he never took Care of Magical Creatures, or he'd know there weren't no small children in my dorm."

Percy feels a shiver of excitement. He must tread carefully, now; he mustn't let on that Riddle is anything to him but a name. "Riddle got an award for finding the beast," he says, his voice as even as he can make it. "That's what Myrtle said."

"All nonsense," Hagrid says, slamming a palm down on the table. "All lies, all slimy lies. He said it was Aragog, and it *wasn't* Aragog, Aragog wouldn't hurt a fly!"

“None of those animals would kill with a glance, would they, Hagrid,” Percy says in an attempt to steer the conversation to basilisk. If the basilisk returns during Ginny’s first year, he hopes to plant the seed so Hagrid can put it together. “If Myrtle was—mauled—wouldn’t her ghost show it? Like the Bloody Baron.”

Hagrid looks thoughtful. “I don’t know much about ghosts myself,” he admits. “Perhaps, perhaps not.”

“Would you...would you help me look into it?” Percy asks, widening his eyes to make him look younger. “Only, it would mean ever so much to Myrtle if we figured out what killed her. It bothers her to this day.”

Hagrid nods after a prolonged silence. “I suppose it can’t hurt,” he rumbles out. “Past is the past, nothing to be done for it.”

“Do you think Riddle lied, then? Or did he think he really got the monster?”

“He probably set the monster on her himself,” Hagrid grumbles to himself. “Er, not that you heard that from me, young Weasley.”

“Myrtle told me there was talk of a *Chamber of Secrets*,” he says, giving the words exaggerated significance. “Was that real, you think?”

Hagrid seems to hesitate. “Between you and me, I think there might have been some truth in it,” he admits. “The Founders probably all had their secret spots in the school. But I imagine we’ll never know the truth.”

***

Myrtle is ecstatic to hear that Percy is trying to solve the mystery of her death. She flies loops through the pipes and retells the story of her death several times.

“Right here in this very bathroom,” she reveals breathlessly. She turns and points to the sink behind her. “The eyes, coming from this very sink.”

“And you don’t remember anything after the eyes,” Percy asks yet again.

Myrtle shakes her head enthusiastically. “Just the eyes, and then I was dead!”

Percy has never seen a basilisk, but he imagines it to be fairly large. He looks at the small, circular sink dubiously. He supposes the snake could have wrapped itself around the sink and laid in wait for Myrtle, though he can’t imagine why it would target her, or why it would enter her bathroom at all. Maybe snakes like damp places? Having no experience handling snakes, Percy is loath to arrive on a theory.

He mentions it in passing to Landon, who is proving to be a fairly adept researcher for a boy of twelve, aided by his father's access to the Greengrass library. Landon writes home for more information about the Chamber of Secrets and receives a terse letter from his father, telling him to keep his nose out of secrets better left hidden.

Tobias Greengrass is not the Greengrass that sat at Tom's heels and looked at him with dark adoration in photographs, but he is the nephew of that Greengrass. Percy wonders what he knows, and what he'd tell his son.

***

(He tries a few times, Tom in mind, to influence his peers: to convince them to eat vegetables, to be early to class, to play a different game than Gobstones. His attempts to sway the crowd are uniformly unsuccessful and with each his mood toward his yearmates grows blacker. Their loss, if they do not follow his example).

***

Auntie Muriel is the same as ever: cantankerous, imperious, and loud.

Percy was always her favourite grandchild, so she rewards him by taking him out to lunch before they go to Gringotts. He evades all personal questions regarding his mother's child rearing techniques and instead updates her on his quest for the Founder's Objects.

"It's a good idea to think of the goblins," she compliments him, digging into her chocolate mousse. "Selfish bastards have records of everything. They believe that once they've crafted an object, it's theirs forever. It's like they haven't bloody heard of the idea of a purchase, or even a lease. Ironic for a bank, no?"

Percy is a bit familiar with Bill's thoughts on the manner but refrains from sharing them. "Do you think they'd tell me if the diadem existed?"

"You? You're a shrimp. They won't tell you how many Galleons are in your vault. They won't even give you a vault, even if you had two Knuts to put in it. They might tell me, though. I'm the head of the Prewett family, if we aren't counting your mother, and I imagine the goblins wouldn't. I warn you they won't tell you where it is now, only if it at one point existed."

"That's fine," Percy says eagerly. "It's only for a personal project. It's not like I'm looking for the actual diadem. We just want to know if it existed."

Muriel barges into Gringotts with the assurance of a much wealthier woman. (Percy is embarrassed, but also enthralled). She intimidates a goblin into taking them by elevator to the

vault—"I *refuse* to step into one of those death carts, do I look like I want to die without an heir?"—and ceremoniously shows Percy what's left of the Prewett inheritance.

Not much. The goblin tiara is appropriately admired, and Percy even sketches it in the book for Landon. There are many books on Light Magic, some of which his aunt allows him to take. Gold—much more gold than in the Weasley vault, but less than one would expect from the Prewett family. A chest of wands, and a few trunks of artefacts. As he stands there, he feels a great and sudden pang of loss for what could have been.

"We were once great," Muriel says, her voice suddenly soft, as if sensing the direction of his thoughts. "The Prewetts were a powerful and respected Light family. This vault would have been full."

"What happened?" Percy asks, feeling his voice tremble just slightly.

She gives a weary gesture. "Fools," his great aunt says dismissively. "They stopped prioritising the family name. They stopped teaching their children the Old Ways."

"The Old Ways?"

"The Old Ways, boy! The rituals, the ceremonies, the ancient days." Auntie Muriel squints at him. "I shall teach you some, this summer. Somebody should learn to greet the summer solstice properly. Merlin knows your mother shan't teach you. I bet your father doesn't even know when the summer solstice is."

He hadn't known his family had Old Ways to follow. The Dark Arts books he'd begun reading are full of them: blood casting and rituals and chants. That there are Light Ways is shocking.

Percy follows his aunt back to the goblin's office, where Muriel pins the goblin with a steely glare.

"The boy is doing research on the Founder's Objects," she says abruptly. "He was clever enough to know that if they existed, the goblins would have made them."

The goblin eyes Percy with interest that feels like rough sand. "Wizarding filth," the goblin spits out. "Why would we tell the boy anything?"

"He wants to pursue magical law," Muriel responds instantly, lying without a second thought. "He is to take our seat on the Wizengamot. Having an ally could be useful."

We have a seat on the Wizengamot? Percy had worked as a scribe there for a year and nobody had told him there was a seat to claim. Perhaps because claiming a seat required more money than Percy would ever see.

The goblin considers this. "We made them, and the wizards stole them," he says after a long pause. "Why would a wizard fight to get them back?"

Percy knows a cue when he sees one. He draws himself up and in his best affronted tone, goes into one of his speeches on *rules* and *doing the right thing*. He'd perfected them during his years as Prefect, and the goblin seems taken aback by his vehemence.

"Rules count for everyone, or they count for no one," Percy finishes.

There are several long and slow blinks before the goblin nods cautiously. "We made them," he repeats. "We made them for each Founder. Swords and crowns and jewellery. And they stole them."

"The diadem?"

The goblin hisses. "Stolen," he confirms darkly. "And the locket and the chalice too."

"The amulets?"

"All stolen, all defiled with filthy wizard magic."

"And the sword, of course."

The look of rage in the goblin's eyes is enough to make Percy step back against Muriel's steadying hand. "Hogwarts stole," he says. "It's *ours*."

Right. Percy lets Auntie Muriel wrap up the interrogation, unsettled by the goblin's furor.

He agrees with his aunt: if somebody purchases or commissions something, it's theirs. As he has no real intention to pursue magical law, he supposes it's not really his problem, but he wonders how this misunderstanding even got started. Why would the goblets sell the object initially if they believe it to be theirs?

Regardless, the meeting is somewhat of a success. He now has confirmation of a locket, a diadem, a sword, a chalice, and several amulets.

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Christmas is emptier without Bill. Ginny wails inconsolably when she learns her favourite brother won't be back for the holidays. Bill's letter, full of his interesting classmates and courses and professors, is hardly an adequate trade.

Charlie tries his best to replace Bill, conducting the normal ceremonies—directing the tree decoration, helping Ginny wrap the presents, lifting Ron to place wreaths over the doorways—but some tension in his mouth suggests to Percy that he too resents Bill's absence, he too is contemplating how much harder it'll be to pursue his own dreams now that their mother feels betrayed by one son.

Percy tries and forces himself to spend time with Fred and George. The safest topic is Hogwarts, and he shows them pictures from *Hogwarts: A History*, while trying to impress upon them the importance of following rules in a castle housing so many young adults. (They don't seem to listen to this, but he is hoping they will absorb some of what he is saying, even if only unknowingly).

They only cause one explosion during the holiday, but as it singes the edge of his book, he does not count it a victory, but perhaps only a stalemate.

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January 1989

Percy is convinced that Tom Riddle killed his own father.

He finds Riddle's parents fairly easily once he bends his mind to it. After failing to find a Riddle in any of the Wizarding records, he deduces that the father must be the Muggle. Percy happens to know that the Chief Librarian is a Muggle-born and therefore perfectly capable of digging up the Muggle marriage records for England, 1900—1930, and obituaries, 1940—1960. He claims to be an author writing a book. (Why don't they have spells on owls that prevent anyone from writing a letter and signing a false name?)

Percy theorises that Riddle likely had an unhappy childhood and begins in 1926, the year of his birth, flipping backward. His intuition is correct: he finds Tom Riddle marrying one Merope Gaunt in 1925, barely one year before Riddle is born.

The obituaries are equally informative. Tom Riddle, Sr. dies in 1943 and Merope's own brother is to blame.

It would make sense, Percy supposes, if Morfin killed his brother-in-law. There is no evidence either way, but Percy can't help but imagine that the only daughter of the Gaunt family would marry a Muggle unless she had no other options. Another owl to the Library of Records confirms that Merope's death is recorded in the Wizarding archives: 1926, the very day that her son came screaming into the world. Percy doesn't know what happens to Tom Riddle, Jr., but he assumes either father or uncle takes him in and delivers him obediently to Hogwarts in eleven years' time. Perhaps the wizard uncle kills the Muggle father to gain custody of the magical child, or the father tries to take the child from the uncle, or the brother tries to avenge his sister's death. Families fight, as Percy knows all too well, and sometimes fights can turn lethal.

But something niggles at Percy's brain. Why would either of the two men wait sixteen years to have an explosive—*fatal*—argument? It isn't quite logical, and Tom Riddle, Percy feels, is a logical man.

Another story unfolds in Percy's brain.

Tom is raised by his uncle or father; it doesn't seem to matter much, in the end. Tom resents them both. His father is a mere Muggle, and his uncle, by all accounts, is an unimpressive wizard despite being the Gaunt heir. Tom sees an opportunity to rid himself of both in one fell swoop and emerge victorious and unattached into the bright and glorious light of adulthood.

Percy wonders why he did not also go the extra step to kill his uncle, rather than allowing him to take the fall for his father's death. If Percy's theory is correct, Tom kills Myrtle in June and his father in August. Why not his uncle in October? Perhaps Tom is fond of Morfin, but given that he essentially condemns the other man to death via Dementor, Percy can't believe that theory holds much credence. No, there must be some other explanation for why Tom hesitates to kill him. Perhaps merely to leave a suspect?

He must have been of use, Percy thinks. Maybe he had something of value, something Riddle was waiting to receive.

A family heirloom perhaps? Access to the vaults? A Gaunt secret that he thought Morfin would give up after a few months in Azkaban? Percy makes a note to look more into the Gaunts.

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March 1989

It only takes a week for Landon to produce a fat tome on genealogy. Oliver and Alex catch him reading it and give him a wide berth for the next few days—researching bloodlines is, apparently, not a proper activity for a young Gryffindor—and so Percy retreats to Myrtle's bathroom to flip through it instead.

("You know, Percy," says Henry uncomfortably, one day after breakfast, accosting Percy during a time he thought he'd be alone in his dorm. His robes are neatly pressed, as usual, but Henry rather spoils the effect by jamming his hands firmly into his pockets, skewing the straight lines of house elf laundry. "If you're interested in, er...magical history, my family has quite the history. I could share it with you sometime. You don't have to read *that*."

"Wonderful," Percy responds coolly before he can stop himself, very purposefully not lifting his eyes from the genealogy book. He cannot help but snap back at his peers every time they judge him so openly, though he tells himself repeatedly each night that he will be more patient and understanding the following day. "I'll let you know if your family history is ever of interest to me.")

He's been thinking more about the mystery of where Riddle grew up. His father and uncle were alive for his childhood, but Harry had clearly said that Riddle was an orphan. Was it possible he had not been raised by either man? Surely not.

There aren't many wizarding orphans. The community is fairly close knit, if not always amicable to each other. Percy could, if pressed, name most, if not all, of the pureblood families and most of the half-bloods, at least the notable ones. Family was important to wizards, and if a child happened to outlive all parents and all relatives, there was sure to be a volunteer family willing to take him in for a variety of motives. All wizarding blood is valuable.

It was why the shock of learning Harry Potter was sent to his Muggle relatives reverberated through the Wizarding World. Half a dozen wizarding families, the Weasleys included, would have volunteered to take him the night he was orphaned, even without knowing of the fantastical events that befell that night. After those became public knowledge, the rest of the families would have been lining up to care for the Boy Who Lived. Why did Harry need to be so poorly cared for by Muggles?

Percy isn't familiar with the Gaunts, but his initial research had told him that they were a long-standing pureblood family. They must have had relatives that could have taken Riddle in. Harry must have been mistaken.

The Gaunt family, Percy finds, is *very* interesting: descendants of Slytherin and as Dark as they come. He borrows more genealogy and history books from Landon, who writes to his father for the ones not typically given to polite company. (It doesn't occur to Percy that Tobias Greengrass takes mental note of one Percival Weasley, brilliant friend of his son, and his budding interest in bloodlines).

He reads of Gaunt after Gaunt, each mad and cruel and brilliant. Gaunts stealing away to begin new schools and Gaunts chasing after to destroy them; Gaunts scheming for Minister of Magic; Gaunts working at Hogwarts.

Most believe the Gaunt line to have died out after Morfin Gaunt's demise in Azkaban. Merope Gaunt, he finds, is merely a footnote, her child not mentioned in a single book. How that must have rankled Tom Riddle, Percy thinks, tracing his finger over *The Account of the Sacred Twenty-Eight*. Percy knows what it is like to be ignored and overlooked. He doesn't imagine Tom handled it any better than he did.

Of course, where Percy reacted by building a career in the Ministry to his family's disdain, Tom tried to take over the world.

However, Percy can admit, Tom is not *dissimilar* to him. Percy can see the appeal of gathering all of these snobbish young men and forcing them to bow to him, the footnote to a footnote, a descendent of Slytherin sullied by Muggle blood.

Voldemort, to Percy's knowledge, did not publicly share his lineage with Slytherin. He famously spoke Parseltongue, of course, though only the uneducated masses truly believed that gift to be unique to descendants of Slytherin. It is a Dark gift but not a truly unique one, as Harry's proficiency shows.

For a man intent on gathering power and acclaim, he seemed to purposefully conceal this fact. Perhaps he was afraid of people researching his history, as Percy is now? Perhaps he had advantages from being a Slytherin, magical gifts he chose not to share. In the Wizarding World, knowing somebody's bloodline makes them vulnerable, in a way.

Maybe Tom Riddle *did* have Slytherin's locket, or whatever object the man left behind. Percy already plans to try and visit the Chamber when the diary makes its way to Hogwarts. The Chamber must have relics of Slytherin; that was the entire point. The locket must be there.

If Tom Riddle *did* have the locket, what's to stop him from going after the other objects?

Stop it, Percy tells himself firmly. Just because *he* is seeking the Founder's Objects does not mean Tom Riddle would have had them on his radar. Tom would have had other projects. Percy's tendency to see Tom involved in every plot is *not* helpful, and he needs to gain control over his speculation.

But he knows that Tom would have found he was related to Slytherin. He wouldn't have let that go unnoticed.

To turn his attention away from Tom, he researches the Gryffindor line. This is less informative; they become the Peverell's, and then the line is lost. He finds, however, that they are buried in Godric's Hollow and makes a mental note to try and visit over the holidays to see who else may be in the cemetery.

Of the Ravenclaw line, he finds nothing. It's as if every book in the Hogwarts library on the Ravenclaw family has been assiduously removed. Landon's father promises to ask around, but he cautions that the Ravenclaws were famously reticent. The Grey Lady, the Ravenclaw ghost, rarely even speaks.

Myrtle asks the Fat Friar about the Hufflepuffs and reports back that the Smith family claims to be descended from Helga herself, though their claim is not officially recognised. Still. Percy knows the Smiths claimed to have the chalice, so probability suggests they are at least somewhat linked.

In the meantime, Percy keeps reading about souls. When he exhausts the Hogwarts supply, he reads them again, taking careful notes and drawing connections as best he can. He doesn't know why, but soul magic fascinates him. So much of complex magic relies on souls—souls to guard, protect, attack, conceal.

He learns that magic and souls are inextricably linked. It has been theorised that one's magical signature in fact reflects one's soul; that wands are linked to souls, that Patroni reflect souls, that Dementors are attracted to souls.

He knows enough about Horcruxes to surmise that they somehow guard a portion of the soul. What he hasn't yet determined is what the *point* was. Presumably if one part of the soul dies, the other parts are anchored to the world, and the first part is reduced to a shade, waiting, searching. But how did Voldemort use his Horcruxes to resurrect himself? He couldn't have absorbed the parts of the soul into himself, for then Harry wouldn't have had anything to destroy. Did the soul split evenly or proportionally? When a Horcrux is destroyed, does the soul piece somehow *snap* back into the main body (how is the main body determined, anyway?) or is it actually destroyed?

He supposes it doesn't *really* matter. Harry had managed to destroy all of the Horcruxes and leave Voldemort mortal enough to kill him. He doesn't imagine Harry cared all that much about the academic particulars of Voldemort's soul.

But Percy itches with the need to *know*, to understand. His mind roves over all of the possibilities. If he destroys the Horcruxes before Voldemort even comes to power, then will Voldemort remain a shade? What if he destroys all but one? What if Voldemort senses their

destruction and merely creates another? Are some Horcruxes stronger than others? Does the order of destruction matter?

The questions torment him. He exhausts Hogwarts' selection of books on the soul, none the wiser, and re-reads them obsessively, looking for something that he had missed. He needs *money* if he is going to take his research beyond what Hogwarts can give him.

(It still doesn't occur to him that Albus Dumbledore, frowning, removes a rather large selection of the books from the library when he notices a second year's interest in them, so like another boy he had once seen, neck bent over a dusty tome. He had removed many of the books then and removes many more of them now).

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April 1989

As the end of the year draws to a close, the second years must choose their electives. Percy looks around him in shock and disgust as many of his peers—even the Ravenclaws, for all their wit, and the allegedly ambitious Slytherins—make these important and life changing decisions with hardly a thought. Percy had always disliked the elective system, given as your choice at twelve essentially limited the next five years of your schooling. It wasn't as if you could switch into Arithmancy after deciding not to take the primer class, not unless you were able to learn the material yourself.

He signs up for Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, and, after a second of hesitation, Divination. He feels as though he can still achieve thirteen or fourteen OWLs with self study, aided by his relentless studying in the previous timeline, and he calculates that studying Divination could give him an excuse to have knowledge of the future if he ever accidentally reveals it.

But Oliver scribbles down his choices on the way to his meeting with McGonagall, and Alex decides based on how easy the classes seem to be, and Landon's classmate Sonali Agarwal chooses the professors she thinks will be the nicest. It's as if they have no sense of how important OWLs are to their future.

It's as if they don't have to know, something whispers within him. It's as if they are literal children that have the whole world ahead of them. Who will deny the elder heir to the Agarwal family an apprenticeship, assuming she does decently in school? Even the Wood family is more well-respected than the Weasleys, and Oliver could always go to his family's workshop to help build racing brooms, as he does in the original timeline. Percy would have thought the Muggleborns would understand, but so many of them seem to be interested only in the same silly considerations as the purebloods and halfbloods, like whether the person they are dating will be in their class, or whether the class meets on Friday, or whether the professor is rumoured to give lots of homework over the weekend. Theodora, a Muggleborn witch in his year, seems to be the only one with any sense at all, musing through her choices deliberately, but even she only takes one class of any real difficulty, ignoring Percy when he

encourages her to stretch herself further. Ancient Runes and Arithmancy ought to be taken together, and Percy knows that Theodora is perfectly capable from his seven years of schooling with her, but she demurs bashfully, which is infuriating to him.

It feels like only Percy must think about his future with desperation and focus and diligence, like only Percy will face a series of closed doors due to his name and his father and his shabby clothing, like only Percy must prove himself by being better than all of his peers.

(It feels like only Percy has the weight of the world on his shoulders, the omnipresent reminder that he is not only studying for his own interest or his own development but rather to gain the necessary strength to battle He Who Must Not Be Named—even if from the shadows. Sometimes the pressure squeezes at his chest, and he cannot breathe, even though he *has* to breathe, he *has* to keep going, he has no other choice).

He marks his choices and submits them quietly to McGonagall, who raises her eyebrow at Divination but does not talk him out of it. "I would have thought you would have tried to take more than three," she says, and he cannot tell if she is approving or disapproving of his choice.

He smiles thinly. "I can still take the OWLs."

"I suppose you can, and you will," McGonagall says in that same neutral tone. She approves the form with a looping signature and then pins him with a beady stare.

"Yes, Professor?"

"It is not easy to feel—ahead of your peers," she says, as if employing Legilimency. "Give them time."

He frowns at the floor. "Yes, Professor."

"Next year, I'm recommending you for tutoring under Professor Snape."

Now his head snaps up. "Professor!"

Her grin is a bit wicked. "I think you'll have something to learn from him," she says. "At the very least, it shan't be an area in which you excel instantly."

This is the price he must pay for being too smart, he supposes. He knows Snape will not be anything resembling kind. He'd never taken tutoring from Snape, never wanted to risk bringing down his wrath. And now that Percy knows what secret Snape is keeping, he doesn't trust himself to be in the same room with him.

He'll have to improve his Occlumency, that's for certain.

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May 1989

In the sunny warmth of May, the sun finally conquering what had been quite a chilly April to cast warm beams of light over the flowering Hogwarts grounds, Percy finally works up the courage to open *Evil Moste Fowle*. He reads it in bed during the afternoon, when the rest of his roommates are out tossing a Quaffle to each other by the lake, his crisp white sheets a cooling balm against the heat streaming in through the open windows.

The book is *fascinating.* More than fascinating, it is brilliant. He reads about magical theory he has never been exposed to, spells he's never heard of, inventions erased from society. It isn't fair. Knowledge is never a waste, and that the Light wizards deprive students of learning this knowledge merely because it is Dark frustrates him. A Light spell can kill just as easily as a Dark one.

(Light magic is about creation. Light magic can be playful, creative, coaxing. Spells to heal and to animate, to give rise to new forms out of existing magic. They can hurt, too, just as a prank taken too far can sting.

Dark Magic is about dominance. Dark Magic bends the subject to its will. It subjugates, it humiliates, it proves the strength of the caster. Dark spells can help, as an abusive parent can clean blood from a split lip, or sly words can empower and then later demean. Despite both lifetimes, Percy has not yet learned this.)

Despite the somewhat squeamish nature of these spells, Percy absorbs the theory easily. It makes sense to him. The spells require *intent.* They require will and focus and power. They feed off emotion, whereas Lighter spells always seemed to spurn emotion. A younger Percy had spurned his own emotion and therefore found this quite reasonable. This Percy is driven by rage and guilt and sadness in addition to curiosity and intelligence. He has no problem accessing these feelings and making them *count.*

He dares not cast any of the spells, not until he's found a place of his own to ward and protect. Myrtle may be his friend, but he thinks she would draw the line at Dark Magic.

He reads, though, and he understands, and his compunctions over the Dark Arts seem to melt away like thin sugar.

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June 1989

As Percy goes home for the summer holiday, he realises one worrisome fact.

Next year, the twins will be riding the train with him.

PERCEPTIONS

Chapter Notes

I know Snape is a bit of a contentious figure in the fandom...but I do love writing him.

Posting this a bit early, as I'm hoping to get Year 4 out soon so we can start with the Harry-at-Hogwarts timeline. On a related note, the years get a bit longer as Percy has more to do than just plot and practise his magic. Year 4 would probably split into 2 short chapters or 1 longish chapter, and once Harry arrives on the scenes, the years get even longer. Any preference for reading several short or 1 long chapter?

As always, comments make me very happy <3

CHAPTER THREE: PERCEPTIONS

1989 — 1990 (Percy is 13 & 26, Snape—to Percy's surprise—is 29, Harry is 9, and the twins are 11)

June 1989

Percy's parents look askance at him when he announces he intends to spend the week of the summer solstice with Aunt Muriel.

"You really need not feel obliged to," Molly says, flicking down a kitchen towel at an invisible spot of dust. Neither of them had been pleased when Percy had visited alone over the previous winter holidays, but he can see them calculating whether a week alone in her presence would be too much for either party to bear.

"I do not feel *obliged.*" Percy does not understand his mother's irritation toward her aunt, but he does not think she should allow it to colour his relationship with her. "Aunt Muriel wants to teach me some of our family history. The Old Ways."

His parents share a look. Percy readies himself for a battle. He is intimately familiar with his parents' surprisingly effective strategy of passive disapproval. First his father will try to *reason* with him, and then his mother will react emotionally, and Percy will be to blame regardless of the outcome. "You know we don't follow those ways anymore," Arthur says hesitantly.

Percy tries to temper the ferocity of his glare. He is nearly thirty; he ought to be able to hold his temper. "You've never explained why."

He can tell that his father chooses the following words carefully. “We feel as though the Old Ways aren’t—inclusive,” Arthur says. “They prescribe a singular way of being a wizard, and we don’t agree with that definition.”

“Because the old Light families didn’t like Muggles?” Percy shakes his head. “It was a different time, then. They had reason not to like Muggles. Think of how many died in the witch hunts. That’s no reason to forsake our heritage.”

“We are making our own heritage,” his mother says fiercely, looking up.

“The Old Ways can connect us to our family, to our history.” He gestures toward his mother. “The Prewetts are an old and ancient family. So are the Weasleys, but we never talk about our heritage. It’s like we’re ashamed of it.”

Molly abruptly flings down the towel and stalks from the room.

Percy and his father sit in silence for a prolonged second. Percy would perhaps feel a bit abashed, if he weren't feeling so annoyed at his earlier predictions being proven correct. Just once, he'd like to have a quiet, calm discussion with his parents. He doesn't see why that ought to be too much to ask.

“Your mother is the last heir to the Prewett family, you know,” his father finally says. “She shouldn’t be. Her brothers both died in the last war.”

“All the more reason to celebrate that part of our history,” Percy presses on. “It doesn’t have to die with her.”

Arthur’s voice is very quiet when he responds. “Have you considered that she feels it already has?”

Percy feels rather as if he’s been hexed. He bows his head and looks at the tablecloth, worn from years of abuse. He can’t understand his mother, sometimes. To be the scion of such a worthy and notable family, and to throw it away to be a housewife to a Weasley son. He has a second chance at life; he has a second chance to right his wrongs. He is not going to throw away his shot merely because his mother made the wrong decisions early in her life. He has a chance to *fix* his life, and he hardly is going to allow himself to forget that for *sentimentality.* Why did his mother have to abandon her family at all? Auntie Muriel is still clearly keen to know her family, and for all of her snide comments on his mother's choices, she evidently misses her great-niece. Percy can understand that his mother loves his father and enjoys their life together, but why did his parents feel they had to cut off all ties to the rest of their family, merely to start their own? It is in such striking contrast to how the old pureblood families view their lineages that Percy feels his parents must be making a deliberate choice.

“I had six siblings,” his father continues. “Seventh son of a seventh son. And yet you lot, you’re the last Weasleys in the direct line.”

“We have plenty of cousins,” Percy scoffs, thinking of the innumerable group they used to see as children, red hair and gawky limbs tangling over each other in the backyard of someone's home.

Arthur shrugs. “Second cousins, third cousins. Weasleys like to stay close. But none are heirs like you are heirs. We’ve always been targeted for our ways, for believing that there’s something more than tradition. Weasleys look toward the future. That’s why we’re in Gryffindor so much of the time. It takes bravery to want to change things.”

Percy worries his lower lip thoughtfully. “Looking to the future doesn’t mean you don’t look to the past,” he says finally. “Otherwise you’re not being brave, you’re being foolhardy. Only by knowing where you come from do you know where you can go.”

His father releases him with a sigh. “Perhaps,” he allows. “Perhaps not. We must make our own decisions about that. But Perce, when you go, keep in mind that the Old Ways didn’t want us to remember them. Not while retaining our independence.”

When he retells this conversation to Aunt Muriel, she snorts derisively. “They didn’t want the Old Ways, more like,” she says, waving a dismissive hand. “Your mother knows many of the rituals and the history. She was taught it, as all young purebloods ought to be taught. She chose not to pass it onto you. Arthur never learned them, but then again, Septimus was always a blood traitor.”

Percy blinks at this casual diatribe. “Because he liked Muggles?”

Aunt Muriel snorts again. “No, although he did like Muggles, for some inexplicable reason. He ran off and joined a Muggle army for a few years, though his parents always pretended he had gone to university. No, boy, use your head. Being a blood traitor has nothing to do with wanting to protect Muggles. It means to betray your blood—your family. Blood is the most important thing that we have.”

“Turning your back on your family makes you a blood traitor,” Percy says, thinking of those cold years where he was celebrated by some and reviled by others for doing that exact thing.

“Your family, yes, and your community,” Aunt Muriel continues. “The Light families used to be connected, same as the Dark. We had bonds forged by blood and marriage and alliances. To betray those bonds was to betray your family.”

“And Septimus betrayed them?”

She sniffs. “He believed his beliefs to be more important than the safety and continuity of the family,” she confirms, and because Percy is watching, he catches the cloud that passes over her aged face. He wonders who else had chosen their beliefs over her, and whether they felt years later that such a decision was justified.

Percy had been thinking he was going to allocate some of his free time to research his own family—but perhaps he does not want to know. Percy has few enough reasons to be proud of his heritage. He does not need more reasons to be ashamed of it too.

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They greet the summer solstice in the morning, standing at the wide and wild cliffs of northeastern Britain.

Aunt Muriel has spent the last week explaining the various rituals and their purposes. Standing to greet the sunrise, outfitted in green and gold to appease the spring, Percy feels strong in a way he's rarely felt.

"We greet you, o sunrise, o giver of life and light," Aunt Muriel cries, her elderly voice lifted to a wild and exultant cry. She repeats it in Latin, holding her wand out like a staff.

A flash of light blinds him. He shakes his head and then holds out his own wand, remembering the words his great-aunt drilled into him. "We worship you, o summer, o time of prosperity and growth," he shouts, before repeating the claim in Latin.

This time the light connects with his wand and for a brief and glorious second he feels wind whip through his hair, his skin warmed by the blaze of the sun.

"We thank you, o gods, for your protection against the Dark," Muriel continues. "We ask for your guidance; we plead with you to fill us with strength so that we may continue to fight."

Another flash. The sea seems to roar in response, crashing against the shore with increased ferocity. He feels the spray improbably wet his face and grins without realising he's moved his face.

The pair kneel and hold out their offering: a young rabbit, slain at noon under the full, round sun. Aunt Muriel takes out a golden knife and slits one of her fingers, dripping her blood on the rabbit. "As an heir to the Prewett name, I offer this life as a proxy for my own," she intones before passing the knife to Percy. He copies her, wincing over the pain.

"As an heir to the Weasley name, I offer this blood as a proxy for my own," he says solemnly, dripping his blood on top of Muriel's.

Aunt Muriel says a long incantation, and the rabbit vanishes, taking their blood with it.

Now, Percy knows, he can ask for something; their sacrifice was accepted. Each gets one wish, but each must say the wish in public. Light wizards shy not away from truth, as Muriel told him last night.

Aunt Muriel is clearly waiting for him to go first. He feels her goading him on. "O summer, o light, o sunrise," he says, staring out over the water. "Let me be bold in my tasks and gain the wisdom I need to complete them. Let me find for what I am searching and claim the power for which I am entitled."

He bows his head and a gust of wind, hot and dry and scorching, sears his exposed neck.

He doesn't flinch.

Aunt Muriel cackles in approval, and the sound is wild and fierce. “O summer, o light, o sunrise,” she echoes. “Let me finally have an heir that is worthy, and teach him of our name and our ways, and show him where to find the power he seeks. So mote it be.”

“So mote it be,” he repeats, and the magic around them swells until he can barely breathe.

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July 1989

Coming home to the Burrow after the solstice is like staring at the pages of a book after looking into the sun. It's as if the words are blurred, as if the story lost its lustre. He trails listlessly through the crooked stairways, thinking longingly of Aunt Muriel's house, grand and proper, everything having its place.

His parents eye him. He ignores them. He'd thought quite a lot about what the Weasley family lacked, particularly during those long days alone at the Ministry. Power, of course, and money. After the war, he'd tried to tell himself that what they had in love made up for their poverty. He'd almost started to believe it, too, particularly as in this life he has seen more of his siblings and felt gladdened to know them.

And he *is* grateful that his parents love him, that he has so many siblings, that his home is full of laughter more often than tears. Even in the last timeline, Percy had felt so incredibly alone when he abandoned his family because the bracing silence of his life echoed so loudly in contrast—because he'd had a family to lose. He can forgive his parents choosing to build a family over pursuing power, even if he cannot understand why they could not have both.

But what he cannot forgive is their turning away from the magic that is their birthright. What was the cost of the solstice ritual? A rabbit, he supposes, one of the many that frolic in the countryside. For the price of a rabbit, the entire family could ask for a wish.

What was wrong with *wanting* things? What was wrong with claiming his magic, the inherent power that flowed through his body? Why was that considered shameful?

He tells this one day to Charlie as they sit by the side of the brook, dangling their feet in. (Percy had been hesitant, but he concluded that seven Weasleys had done this for nearly a decade and none had contracted a nasty fungus). His older brother sighs and wiggles his toes, watching as a school of small silver fish dart away in shock.

"To be honest, Perce, I don't know," Charlie admits. "But you have to remember, they came out of a war. Maybe to them, this kind of life was more than enough."

"I suppose," Percy says, thinking of his own war that lies both in his past and in his future. He can't recall feeling like this would ever be enough.

A companionable silence falls, broken by Charlie determinedly not meeting his eyes. "Do you think you should—claim yourself, even if people don't understand it?"

Percy barely resists the urge to turn and look more closely at Charlie. This is probably about the dragons, he reminds himself and stays nonchalant. "I think so," he responds instead. "As long as you're not breaking the law, or anything."

When Charlie doesn't respond, Percy tries again. He's found he enjoys being privy to these confidences, almost as if he is the elder brother. "You should follow your dreams, anyway."

"It's not that," Charlie says, before breaking away. "Well, there is that too. Mum's not going to be very happy with me for a long time."

"It's not the dragons?"

"Am I that obvious, about the dragons?"

Percy has to smile. "Yes," he says. "You've been telling me about dragons since you've been ten years old. I'm not daft, Charlie. Mum will understand."

Charlie snorts. Considering how their mother responded to Charlie going to Romania, Percy can't quite blame him for his disbelief.

"It's not that," he says, curling and uncurling his toes in the water.

Percy casts his brain about what could be bothering Charlie. To be frank, Percy doesn't know that much about his second eldest brother, who nearly always kept to himself. He'd be in Romania this time next year, and he'd never written to Percy, not even during the feud with the family. They had probably spoken more in this timeline than in his entire previous life combined.

(Perhaps it makes up for how he cannot really bear to be in the same room as Fred and George, still. His lack of control is embarrassing, but he does not like to think about it long enough to *do* anything about it).

"I miss Nym," Charlie says out of thin air. "Nymphadora Tonks, she's a Hufflepuff in my year."

"Yes, you fought, didn't you?"

He shrugs one tanned and freckled shoulder. "I told her I loved her."

This is so uncharacteristically Charlie that Percy has to turn and stare, agape, at his brother.

Charlie raises his hands, laughing, and the tension seeps out of the air into the running water, gurgling downstream. "I was fifteen and an idiot."

"Is that why she stopped speaking to you?"

"Sort of." Charlie looks down and suddenly the tension is back in the lining of his muscled back. "I don't even know why I'm talking about this with you. You're thirteen."

"Because you know I'm wise beyond my years?"

"Something like that. Maybe I'm just desperate for someone to talk to." Charlie heaves out a sigh. In the pause, he reaches out with one hairy toe, slowly cornering a small fish. Percy watches as Charlie, very gently, brushes the tip of his toe against the fish, which flutters in the water as if immobolised. "The thing is, she told me I can't love her, because—well, because, um, she's not my type."

Percy tries to recall Tonks. He can primarily recall her body lying on the dusty floor, hand clasped in Lupin's. *That* was a relationship he'd never understood. One of the Black heirs, wedded to a *werewolf* thirteen years her senior? And she'd risked having a *child*, despite the utter lack of research on a werewolf's progeny? And then they'd *both* gone to battle, the bloody fools, leaving their son alone when they were both tragically killed. No, Percy cannot say he knows or understands Nymphadora Tonks.

"And she stopped speaking to you because…" he prompts Charlie.

"She's not my type because she's a girl," Charlie says in a rush and then looks determinedly away.

Percy realises after a heartbeat that he's once again gaping. Why, Charlie had never said anything in the original timeline, not for *years*! Was Percy the only one not to know? No, that would be impossible, he'd have to have found out. Had Charlie just kept it a secret this whole time?

"Are you mad?" Charlie says after the silence stretches too long. His voice is timid, nothing like the cheerful baritone he'd grown into early at fourteen.

Percy shakes his head as quickly as he can. "No, no," he says, perhaps too quickly. He isn't *mad.* One's...preferences were not something he would necessarily be *mad* about, though he can't help but think it's lucky that Charlie is one of six sons and therefore not under any *major* obligation to carry on the family line. It may help the Weasleys to have fewer progeny, come to think of it. Nevertheless, Percy does not envy Charlie, nor his having to tell Molly Weasley he shan't be giving her any grandchildren. Merlin. Percy hastens to say something to cover the direction of his thoughts. "I was just trying to think about what you could say to Nymphadora."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know her very well, but I don't think she'd be the type to stop speaking to you because, you know—er," Percy flushes, less at Charlie's *preference* and more out of a lack of experience with this topic more generally, but forces himself to soldier on. "Because you like boys."

Charlie blushes too and clutches at a handful of grass, as if to ground himself. "No, she's not like that." He trails off, looking ahead absently. "I think she was mad that I wasn't being

more brave. Funny, isn't it? That's why she started dating Clarissa, I think. To show me that I could date another bloke if I wanted to." He sighs and wiggles his toes again in the water. "Everything's easy for Nym. Nobody said anything, but she's *Nymphadora Tonks*. She can do anything she likes, and everyone is fine with it. They probably figured she was dating a girl for a laugh. The thing is," he continues, his voice low. "I do love her, too."

Percy has absolutely no idea what to say, but he gathers up his own bravery. "Nobody can tell you when to do something," he says, thinking of his own experience, how long it had taken him to admit to his family he was wrong. Charlie admitting he was gay was unexpected, but Percy had already lived through a war that took one of his siblings and many of his classmates. In the grand scheme of the next decade, Charlie liking men is so inconsequential that Percy can already feel his shock fading, this to be another fact about his brother, no different than knowing his preference for roast beef over cured ham. At least Charlie wasn't going to brand himself with a Dark Mark and disown himself from his family. Percy does not think he gained very much in the last war, but he did at least gain *some* perspective. "Sometimes them telling you makes it even worse. You have every right to decide for yourself when you're ready. And if it feels different for you than it did for her, that's your own prerogative, not hers."

Charlie tries for a weak smile. "You *are* getting wise, Perce."

"You should talk to her," he continues, buoyed by the positive response he's getting from Charlie. Is this what it is like to be someone's confidant—and to actually help them? Perhaps he should try it more often. "Tell her what you're feeling. You're good friends, this shouldn't come between you. I'm sure she feels bad about not speaking to you, but she doesn't want to be the first to give in."

"You think?"

"Trust me," Percy says with vehemence, thinking of so many days alone in his tiny, horrid flat. "It's hard to admit you're wrong. She'll be grateful you reached out first."

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September 1989

Charlie takes his advice, or so Percy deduces when he sees Errol begin to have a bit more responsibilities, flapping feebly through the window with a bundle of letters. It makes him feel warm to know that he actually was able to help one of his brothers. He can't think of a single time in the last timeline that one of them actually listened to him.

He, Charlie, Fred, and George sit together on the train, though the latter two grow bored halfway to Scotland and go to find some friends of their own. Charlie and Percy do not talk

very much, but the silence is companionable nevertheless.

His third year begins, and with it so does Fred and George's tenure at Hogwarts. Looking at them huddled together at the Gryffindor table makes his heart ache for a brief second. He feels suddenly, immensely guilty that he let the summer pass without making any headway.

This year, he vows, he will make progress.

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The next day, he swallows his pride and goes to ask Snape for extra tutelage.

He idly is contemplating making the portrait potion, yes, but it has also occurred to Percy that he should begin making potions that will be useful to him. He believes he has enough command over his magic that he could possibly sneak away from Hogwarts without being discovered. The Trace doesn't appear to affect him, his dual age seeming to fool the ancient magic. A dose or two of Polyjuice wouldn't go awry, but Percy isn't too arrogant to admit that he likely is not skilled enough to make the potion on his own.

"I have been waiting for you," Snape says softly as Percy fights the urge to fidget in front of him. Snape's office is smaller than his classroom, but Snape's presence fills both rooms as if they were the size of broom closets. Percy feels very claustrophic.

"Sir?"

"Transfiguration every week; Charms once a month; even a biweekly Herbology tutorial."

Percy waits this out. He does not know Snape well, but he has taken nearly a decade of lessons from the man. He knows when Snape has something more to say.

"And yet," Snape continues silkily, "the prodigy does not seem to care for Potions." Percy feels as though he should respond but does not know what to say. Silence, he's found, seems to work best on Snape, who eventually continues. "What has changed?"

Percy starts and then hands over the recipe for the portrait potion. "I am interested in magical portraiture, sir," he says politely. "Margaret Fields—she graduated last year—recommended that I ask you for help."

Snape scans it. "You believe you have even an *ounce* of the required skill for this—"

"Well, no, sir," says Percy. "Hence why I am requesting extra tutelage."

He knows immediately it is the wrong thing to say. Snape gives him a blistering glance, and Percy parses back his last response and winces inwardly. He'd not meant to *cheek* Snape, but rather point out the obvious and save them all some time.

He holds his breath. Snape surveys him. Granted, Snape had never been particularly nasty to Percy, likely because Percy does his work quietly and well, but he had never been particularly *nice.*

Snape catches Percy's eyes intently. "What is the real reason you wish to have tutelage? Do not lie to me, boy."

Percy looks at the crease between the man's eyebrows instead of his eyes. What an odd and unwarranted question, but Snape had always been an odd man. "The potion, sir. And—there's a lot of fields that require Potions, sir. I hope to keep my options open. Potions can help me learn, sir." Snape continues to look unimpressed. "And, if you may recall, you once called my work *uninspiring*. I don't particularly want that to continue."

There is a long pause.

"And what else? Do not tell me your motivations are so shallow."

Percy bites his lower lip, knowing he is being goaded but unable to prevent himself from responding. "Because it is a challenge," he says, and this time he is being honest. "Because I am not able to move beyond what the textbook teaches. Because you think I am uninspiring, and I don't want to be uninspiring, not in *anything*." *Not ever again*, he mentally completes in his head.

"I do not teach students who do not keep up," Snape warns, looking rather menacing. "If you dare to come to a single lesson unprepared, you will never return."

"Yes, sir." Percy never comes to anything *unprepared.*

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He brings his cauldron, his note-taking scrolls and self-inking quill, his gloves and an extra rag, but he is not prepared for the cheerful, casual malice that underpins Snape's lessons. Snape is nasty in class, but Percy has never been the target of it. Here, alone in front of his bubbling cauldron, there is no Luciana or Penny to attract Snape's ire as there is during a group lesson.

In many of the tutelage sessions, Snape keeps up a constant stream of one-sided conversation, insulting Percy, his family, his abilities, his lack of friends, his prospects, and everything in between. If Percy bows his head and filters out nearly everything, there are at times nuggets of information. Certainly, even after two or three weeks, Percy feels as though he is improving—but by Merlin, at what cost?

Snape seems to delight in pointing out what Percy had always known: Potions is not his forte, even if he mugs the books as hard as he can the night before the tutorial. At his most

irritating, Snape will allow Percy to fail and then prepare the potion in front of him, completely disregarding the recipe, and often in a fraction of the time.

“And here I thought you were ambitious,” Snape says lazily, peering into Percy’s cauldron with something approaching delight. “Alas, I am destined to be incorrect about students that merely have a modicum of intelligence.”

“I followed the recipe, sir,” Percy responds, gritting his teeth. He had, too. He remembers making this potion in fourth year and it had looked exactly the same. He’d received an EE for that potion.

Snape sniffs derisively and lets the ladle drop into the pale blue liquid. “A House Elf can brew a potion, provided with a recipe.”

“I don’t understand what you want me to do, if not follow a recipe. Sir.” Percy is fed up, and his irritation sharpens his tone. He knows that Snape is merely four years older than him, if he counts his double age—and isn’t that an odd thought, to know now that the teacher he’d thought so frightening was yet under thirty still—and while he can take some level of condescension from his other professors, Percy has just about reached his limit with this particular one.

“*Think*, you idiot,” Snape says with exasperation. He vanishes the potion, ignoring Percy’s yelp. “Again, without the recipe.”

Percy does not think before he snaps back, “How am I meant to brew without the recipe?”

Snape is very still, and Percy shuts his mouth, recognizing a line has been crossed. Snape is more lax with respect in these private lessons—particularly, Percy suspects, because he’s been doing an adequate job—but the aura of danger that creeps between them reminds Percy that Snape fights through two wars and plays a pivotal role in both.

“You *think*,” Snape says, very softly. “Or you leave, right now.”

Percy keeps his face as blank as possible and pulls out a sheet of parchment. “I will endeavour to think, if that is my own option,” he responds, skirting the line into sardonic.

If he hadn’t known better, he would have thought the look on Snape’s face may be amusement. Better than hatred, at the very least.

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October 1989

Fred and George create a massive ruckus trying to break into Ravenclaw Tower. Percy and Charlie both get called to Filch’s office to confront the tiny miscreants. After McGonagall

and Flitwick leave—stern lecture unsuccessfully rolled out for the two unrepentant twins—Percy spots Fred pocket something as George distracts Filch with a clearly insincere apology.

(He wonders if they were offered Slytherin and turned it down).

Percy *is* curious though. A wordless summoning charm nets the parchment for his own as Charlie leads the twins up to Gryffindor Tower, and Percy is the proud owner of a dirty old piece of parchment that seems designed to insult him at every opportunity.

Although, there *is* a rather complex network of charms layered over it, far too many for a piece of joke paper. Percy sits up and examines it more closely.

Mister Prongs must wonder what business a scrawny git like you has with the Marauders.

Mister Padfoot must agree, and must add that those glasses do nothing for your general appearance.

He's heard those names before. Years ago, now, but from Harry or Ron...some Gryffindor joke, perhaps?

Mister Moony is rather curious why you have not yet fixed your hair to be more presentable.

Percy's hair is perfectly presentable, and anyway he's already determined the spells to fuel these insults are rudimentary at best. The real magic is hidden beneath, a series of spells that seem to be related to location intersecting in interesting ways.

Mister Wormtail concurs.

Wormtail. Percy knows this one. How could he not? It was his rat that was a Death Eater. Is. Percy gives an uneasy glance to his desk, where Scabbers is scrabbling around for food, and then tugs the hangings on his bed closed more tightly.

Harry had an enchanted map, he remembers. Hermione had teased him and Ginny once, when they'd arrived as a couple to the Burrow for the first time. She'd mentioned how Harry had watched Ginny on the map that year they were apart, which Percy remembers because he'd thought it was a bit creepy.

Wormtail must be Pettigrew. Moony—Lupin, most likely, though if Percy were a werewolf he would certainly pick a better nickname than *Moony*. Padfoot and Prongs must be Black and Potter, or Potter and Black. Although, Black is a dog Animagus, which he supposes dubiously must merit the nickname *Padfoot.*

There's something he could try, but it *is* a bit Dark, but Percy really wants to see if this is the map that he remembers them mentioning, and it's just an enchanted parchment at the end of the day. It can hardly hurt him.

Many Dark spells require blood. This one doesn't, which makes it feel marginally safer. What one does is *compel* the object to give up its secret. If one doesn't have the requisite control, one can destroy the object, for what the spell does is threaten, in a subtle and absolutely

fascinating application of magic, the object into giving up its secrets. For the spell to work, the caster would have had to put quite a bit of themselves into creating the product.

He whispers the incantation and the paper stretches like a body tensing, before crumpling and uncrumpling in an agitated fashion. He feels a pressure in his mind, an echo of a boy's childish laughter, a sense of excitement and mischief, and the flickering lights of the candles in the Great Hall. He pushes harder and the parchment begins to thrum gently.

I solemnly swear I am up to no good, he hears distinctly in his mind, catches a flash of a boy with dark hair and glinting glasses.

There's something else though, and he doesn't let up the pressure in his mind. *Show me*, he commands, imperious and firm, unaware that his forehead is beaded with sweat and the veins in his wrist are standing tautly against his skin.

He hears again the boy, and for a second he sees all four of them, huddled over the parchment in a quiet corner of the Great Hall, jostling for space as the one with sandy hair traces runes with his wand on the parchment. For a few heartbeats he is among them, sharing their glee, feeling the strain of the complicated magic as the runes coalesce with the brew they'd coated the parchment with, activated by a complex layering of spells cast in tandem with the runes. He pushes out with his mind and all four boys look up at him together in surprise.

A laugh echoes in his ears, and the parchment flutters back to land on the table. *Mischief managed.*

Percy staggers back, exhausted but triumphant. This, *this* is magic! Magic that allows him to dip back in time, to access the very consciousness of objects, insofar as they have consciousness, to compel them to give him their secrets, at no cost but his own will.

"I solemnly swear I am up to no good," he says out loud, and the secrets of the map unfold in front of him like a flower.

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The Marauders Map is, quite honestly, fascinating. Percy sets himself to the task of unravelling the magic the four Gryffindor boys used to create it. They were sixteen and he's fully an adult, so he imagines it won't take very long.

It does.

Myrtle peers over his shoulder at it one afternoon. Percy has taken to doing the majority of his work in the bathroom, far beyond their weekly meetings to read the books he checks out from the library. She helpfully floods the front door whenever he comes in for anything longer than a brief chat to forestall any weeping students looking for refuge. Myrtle, he soon

discovers, is quite brilliant, whether from dropping in on fifty years of classes or due to innate ability.

(It's interesting, he thinks, that one can learn after death. Grow, in a way. Myrtle will never leave Hogwarts, but she can acquire new information, speak to new people, experience new events).

"I've seen this before," she reminisces. "Those boys. I saw them using it quite a few times. Their pranks were *legendary*."

"My brothers stole it from Filch," he says, his wand hovering over the corner of the Map. There is a small entangled drawing that he has noticed is always on the Map no matter how he folds it, as if it follows his wand or his gaze. The drawing itself is crude: a M enclosed in a large circle with horns growing out of it, a pattern of prints, whiskers. He can guess its significance rather easily.

Myrtle pulls up a ghostly chair, so to speak. (Another thing to think about, when he has the time. How do ghosts fly or sit? He suspects it is similar to the Levitation Charm, some sort of hardening of air, but he isn't certain). "Do you think that's the anchor?"

"The anchor?"

Myrtle nods. "One way to track everyone would be to track their souls, but then it wouldn't update without somebody continually re-enchanting it."

"You know, Myrtle, if we prove the Map shows souls, you can tell the Fat Friar you have evidence that you still have a soul," Percy points out, his eyes drawn to their twin dots in the bathroom. This is a point of contention between them.

Myrtle hums as she considers this. "If," she says pompously. "Two letters to change the world, and two letters to keep it as is. Our last Head of House used to say that."

"When did Flitwick become Head of House, anyway?"

"The year I died, actually," Myrtle says gleefully. "A shock to him, the poor fellow."

So Flitwick had known Riddle, albeit briefly. He makes a mental note to look up the other professors and then returns his attention to the task at hand. "What's an anchor, then?"

When Myrtle lectures, her voice falls into a steady cadence that reminds Percy tremendously of McGonagall. "The Map needs to continually access some sort of reference to be able to identify who everybody is at what time—an anchor. If the anchor was a person, it is likely the Map would only display what that person knows, or very little. Thus, we can conclude the anchor must be an entity. What entity knows everybody at Hogwarts?"

"The Sorting Hat," Percy says instantly.

They look at each other.

Percy immediately thinks of an objection. “That can’t be,” he says. “When visitors come, do they show up on the Map?”

“If they are British wizards, it’s likely the Hat would still recognise their magical essence,” Myrtle points out.

Unfortunately, Percy has no idea how to test if the Map can recognise foreign wizards. Regardless, the Hat is a good place to start, if nothing else.

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“*Expecto Patronum!”*

White mist steams from his wand. Percy grits his teeth. For some spells, he feels the magic licking his veins, channelled through his wand. He feels alive; enlivened; aflame. It seems to him only a matter of time before he drops his wand and lets the magic flow through his hand, sparking the sensitive pads of each finger.

For other spells, his head feels heavy and full of cotton.

In the other lifetime, Percy had a decent Patronus, made necessary by the presence of Dementors in the Ministry. A small sparrow, it would often flutter around his shoulders and dive behind his head for protection before sputtering out.

In this lifetime, he cannot produce his sparrow at all, and he can’t figure out *why.*

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(He’d thought, naively perhaps, that this time around he could *bond* with Fred and George in this timeline. And to some extent, he does spend more time with them than he had previously, forcing himself to sit next to them at supper, shepherding them to the library on the eve of big deadlines.

But he knows they mock him in those sly, impenetrable glances. They had no trouble making friends; aside from their complete lack of discipline, they seem to be doing well in their classes; they are not like him, adrift in the big sea of the castle.

Of all the Weasleys, the twins seem to be the most fully formed, the least mired by self-doubt or the necessity of personal growth. They do not seem to hesitate or stumble. Perhaps their surety comes from the implacable knowledge that they will never be alone, that they are half of a whole, that they have someone unquestionably on their side. For Percy, the odd sibling

out, the middle child of the entire family, this feeling creates a divide that is impossible to cross).

*

"Do you believe in souls, Professor?" Percy asks a few weeks later, after determining yet again that nothing in the Hogwarts library will suit his needs. At this point, he's debating whether he actually could leave Hogwarts without being caught. It seems like such a high risk, though the reward would be great as well.

Professor McGonagall purses her lips but responds. They have just finished discussing the transformation of inorganic into organic material; considerably more difficult than the opposite, for reasons fascinating. "Of course," she says. "Although our evidence lies primarily by inference. Only the existence of souls can explain many things in our world. Patroni, for instance, and Dementors."

"It's said that a Patronus reflects the soul," Percy says thoughtfully. "But I thought Dementors, er, *ate* the soul. Or something like that." He winces. What an inelegant wording.

McGonagall kindly overlooks his verbal fluster. "Theory suggests a Patronus is a physical representation of the soul, but you raise an interesting point. One would imagine the Dementor would, in that case, merely attack the Patronus. Can a soul protect itself? If a Patronus is not the soul, what is it? I shall have to look into that. My theory is that a Patronus is nothing more than soul *magic* channelled into a form, as opposed to bringing into being a fragment of the soul."

She doesn't recommend he ask the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. Percy doesn't suggest it either. The woman has yet to impart any information of value. Why Dumbledore cannot find a single professor to competently teach Defence—at least to guide the study of the textbook, for Merlin's sake—is beyond Percy, who finds it no less disgraceful in this timeline than he did in the last. There will be a war in Britain within the decade, and hundreds of students ill-equipped to defend themselves.

"Like how Occlumency is not your mind, but mind *magic,*" Percy says.

McGonagall eyes him and shakes her head, a small smile twisting her lips. "I shall forget you said that. Occlumency is a restricted magic, as you very well know."

"Portraits," he continues, storing the question of Dementors for a later research session. His previous attempts, he now sees, were hopelessly limited, concerned only with souls and not with soul magic. "They must involve the soul."

"Potentially," McGonagall concedes. "Not much is known about portraiture. It is a very ancient and guarded subject. As far as I know, master portraits typically take apprentices; it's certainly something to look into, if you are so inclined."

"Ghosts?"

"Also a contentious topic. The issue, you can imagine, is the distinction between our magic and our souls. Are our Patroni merely magic? Are portraits enchanted solely by magic? What is the difference between our magical core and our soul?"

They fall silent companionably, lost in thought.

"Animagi forms are also theorised to reflect the soul," McGonagall continues, her eyes lighting up. "It's a bit above your level at the moment, but when you've learned more about Patroni we shall have a very interesting conversation about the difference between a Patronus —considered to be a temporary representation of your *current* soul, per se—and an Animagus, which is a permanent form. Although, of course, if we take Patronus to be soul magic rather than a representation of a soul, what can we say about the magic that allows us to transform our bodies? Is it soul magic, or something else?"

She looks up and suddenly is a professor again, and only then does Percy realise the subtle change that had fallen upon her. It was as if she'd forgotten she was talking to a third year student.

"I think for homework you must find five other spells or branches of magic that lend credence to the idea of a soul," she decrees. "A bit tangential from the study of Transfiguration, but I like to encourage intellectual curiosity, not that you lack it. After we have a better idea of what magical application suggests about the soul, we shall discuss what it means to have a soul. You may delve deeper into some of the ideas we discussed if necessary, but I challenge you to find others."

Percy looks down and grins at this unexpected ally.

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November 1989

The Fidelius Charm, he finds, is thought to guard a secret within the soul itself. A stronger soul, insofar as such a thing exists, can guard a bigger secret, or guard the same secret better. From what he can decipher from the book, old and full of runes, a Secret Keeper is not completely immune from magical forms of coercion such as Imperius or Legilemincy. He may give up the secret if his soul is 'weak', whatever that means, but may die in the attempt.

He thinks of the now famous story of Peter Pettigrew. Why would they trust Peter at all? Why would they not entrust the secret to Dumbledore, or even Professor McGonagall, or anyone else in the Order? Or, better yet, take on the secret themselves? The book does not outwardly say that people cannot guard their own secrets, though it vaguely warns against it.

Why wouldn't they make Peter take an Unbreakable Vow?

That, of course, sends him down another gnome burrow. As anticipated, the Unbreakable Vow also seems to involve the soul, by binding the vow to the soul itself. Breaking the vow destroys your soul.

(Although, he can't help but think, would that not create a Soul-Sucked person? How does a Dementor remove the soul without killing a person? What is the link between a soul and a life?)

Two applications down. Unable to think of another, he returns to the earlier examples. He's rather interested in ghosts and portraiture. Guiltily, for he probably ought to be researching the Dark Lord instead of this, he checks out a few related books to read in the Common Room. These, at least, are entirely for homework and therefore acceptable for the public.

He cannot work all the time, after all, and he has *years*. Hogwarts was not enchanted in a day, and neither will a tyranny fall. He deserves some time to pursue his own interests, too.

He's embroiled in a *fascinating* chapter on the theorised creation methods of magical portraits when Charlie drops into the chair opposite. "Interested in becoming a portrait artist?"

"It's rather interesting," Percy says, marking his place in the book. Charlie is not the type of person to note that Percy was clearly in the middle of something.

"Glad to join the Painting Club, are we?" Charlie says with a grin, having heard Percy complain about the eagle eyes tracking his *integration* with his peers several times.

Percy rolls his eyes. "Not you too."

"But Percy, you have to *socialise*." He bats his eyes at him earnestly.

Percy gives him a dour glare and picks up his book delicately.

"No, I'm kidding, I'm kidding. Shall we join the twins for supper? I've noticed you've been missing meals lately, and portraiture can't be *that* interesting."

"I've been busy," he excuses himself, a bit surprised that his brother had noticed his habitual absence from the Great Hall. He motions vaguely at his notes. "Professor McGonagall wants me to think of five applications of magic that likely involve the soul," he explains for context. "Some believe paintings copy the soul, like an imprint. Others believe they contain a… fragment of some sort. Still others maintain it is a type of magic tied to memories, like a Pensieve. I'm not sure yet what I believe."

Charlie wrinkles his nose. Percy feels a rush of affection for this child-version of his brother, still barely seventeen, not yet the man that he grows into. Sometimes it hits him when he sees Oliver shouldering a broom larger than him, or George gesturing with lanky arms to Lee. They are all so young, and yet in under ten years they will all be impossibly aged. Some of them will be dead. Many of them.

"Healing, perhaps?" Charlie suggests unexpectedly.

"Healing the soul?"

"I dunno, it seems like it could be a branch of magic," he says with a shrug. "If you assume the soul can be harmed, then shouldn't it be able to be healed too?"

Percy ponders this. He wonders if this is what McGonagall meant by learning through inference. "I suppose."

"Maybe you could look at the bookstore next time you can go to Hogsmeade. Anyway, fancy a meal?"

Percy reluctantly sets his book down but less reluctantly follows his brother.

***

On the first Hogsmeade weekend, Percy goes alone into the village at seven am, technically the earliest time that the students can walk down by themselves. Nobody else bothers to go; it is somewhat of tradition for all the students to walk together for the first Hogsmeade weekend in a large, chattering crowd in the warmth of the afternoon.

It suits him. It suits him even more when he catches sight of Hogsmeade again and stops in his tracks. Hogsmeade in the fall is lovely: trees wide and colourful, cobblestone roads recently cleaned, storefronts wide open. Hogwarts has not yet had its first snow, but the crisp smell of changing leaves and morning ice are in the air. The Battle of Hogwarts had almost entirely destroyed the Wizarding village. Percy had never gone back after the memorial ceremony and it is a shock to see it gleaming and new. Seeing Madam Rosmerta, entirely alive, sweeping the steps in front of the Three Broomsticks is almost more than he can handle.

Percy had never been particularly fond of Hogsmeade, particularly as he'd typically had no money to spend on frivolous things. He still has very little money, but he has saved every Knut he can for this weekend, and now in his maturity he can appreciate the welcoming atmosphere of Hogsmeade for its own sake.

The rare bookstore in Hogsmeade turns out to be a find. Percy spends entirely too much money on several promising books. There's even a small primer alleging to teach Parseltongue. He also purchases a book on magical portraiture and three different ones on soul magic. At the last minute, he gathers up his courage to purchase another set of books written by the same author as *Evile Moste Fowle.* It wipes out his small reserve of cash almost entirely, even including the small gift Auntie Muriel gave him for the summer solstice. Perhaps he can visit her over the winter holidays and she'll give him a bit more.

The proprietor of the bookstore does not seem to care what he buys, and that alone is liberating. He is thirteen, nearly fourteen, and soon to be closer to his majority than away from it. He bundles his books carefully nonetheless and only takes them out when he is safe in his dormitory.

The one on Parseltongue he gives a cursory glance and then lays aside. The likelihood of the book being real is slim, but he may learn something nonetheless. No knowledge is a waste. At the very least, he expects Myrtle will enjoy hearing him struggle through the fiendishly complicated sibilant sounds that seem to be indicated by a series of cramped symbols. The book on portraiture vies for his attention, as do those on soul magic, but he turns almost eagerly to the ones on Dark Magic.

***

Percy *hates* being bad at lessons.

Snape makes absolutely no effort to help him improve. He watches him ruin cauldron after cauldron and merely sits behind his desk, dark eyes unreadable. The only question he asks is *why*: why add bicorn horn to create an explosive force? Why stir three times counter-clockwise? Why did adding those ingredients in that order cause that reaction?

Percy absolutely hates it. He has not failed at anything in many years, and years of laughably easy lessons at Hogwarts have lulled Percy into a placid sense of peace.

Snape refuses to allow that to continue, and Percy refuses to allow Snape to win.

And thus, Potions tutelage continues.

***

December 1989

Myrtle has grown tired of their Occlumency practice (he is in the middle of reading to her a treatise on Herbology, a subject she finds surprisingly interesting; perhaps, he theorises, due to her own, well, deadened state), but Percy finds he quite likes it. The exercises suit him; he sinks easily into the state of meditative calm required to centre oneself and build a defence. One of the recommended tasks before bed is to carefully and sequentially consider the entire day, sorting the memories into groups and subgroups. His mental model soon grows to resemble a library, indexed by the same sorting system the Hogwarts library and Library of Records share, shelves for everything and a slot for each memory. He soon finds that practising the nightly sort, as he thinks of it, becomes almost second nature, the magic of Occlumency allowing his memories to instantiate into books with nearly physical weight. One night, he even walks through the shelves, feeling their cool grain beneath his trailing hand.

His memory improves, too. He finds himself able to recall facts by thinking of their relations to his mental shelves. He can flip through the books and see passages, sometimes, though that

typically only applies to memories or words he frequently recalls.

Still, he grows to enjoy the afternoons they spend together in the sunny bathroom, though by December he has to rely on his own warming spells as well. Myrtle continues to cheerfully and obligingly flood the outdoor corridor whenever he comes by and even shows him the small door the caretaker is meant to use to enter while cleaning. Filch avoids Myrtle's lavatory like the plague, so Percy feels comfortable enchanting it lightly with a *Notice Me Not*. Percy claims a stall for his own and enchants it heavily, both to keep it sanitary and to keep a relatively safe place to keep some of his things. Nothing he couldn't replace, of course.

"I wish I were alive now," she says one lazy afternoon, making gentle loops in the air.

Percy adjusts his glasses and looks up at her quizzically. "1989?"

She turns and rests her chin on her ghostly arms. Her smile is warm, giggling. "To be a student with you, of course."

He looks down, his ears flaming. But, he is a Gryffindor, and so he drags his gaze back up. "That would be nice, Myrtle."

***

Percy does not notice, but a ghost begins to follow him.

A ghost who has spent over a year hearing about this boy from Myrtle; a ghost who once trusted another young bright boy and regretted it; a ghost who is very interested in Percy's project to look into the Founder's objects.

She waits, and she watches, and she judges.

***

Aside from the mystery of the anchor—which, he reasons, cannot be overly complex if sixth years gained access to it—unravelling the Map goes quite well. The construction of the Map relies heavily on runes and Arithmancy, two subjects in which he'd excelled the first time around. It takes him most of the first term to review the necessary chapters of the sixth year textbooks, but by the time he is ready to sit his final exams, Percy is attempting to replicate the Map on another piece of charmed parchment.

He's reviewing *Hogwarts: A History* for the seventeenth time, scouring it to see if he'd missed any potential anchors, when Charlie drops in next to him at the Gryffindor table, the

twins trailing behind. Percy makes room for his brothers on the bench, but the twins are held up in a conspiratorial conference with Lee Jordan and so Percy is spared from having to suffer the embarrassment of his younger brothers commenting on his seclusion from the rest of his peers. (Mariana, Theodora, Elizabeth and Alex are trading stories a few seats down, but Percy hadn't been sure whether Mariana's smile had been one of invitation or of pity and so had taken himself and his book further down).

“Perce, my lad, you cannot still be studying,” the seventh year says, exasperated. “I know you must have passed your exams because of course you’ve passed your exams. What are you even reading?”

“*Hogwarts: A History,*” Percy says, reluctantly closing his book. “I’m doing some research on the Founder’s Objects for an extra-curricular project.”

“Are you doing tutelage in every subject, then?” Charlie says, nicking the book neatly. “You really are a swot.”

Percy does not deign to respond to that. “Nearly every subject,” he says instead, with what he hopes is dignity. “The curriculum is a bit dull, on its own.”

Charlie begins loading up a plate, even though Percy is fairly sure his older brother came from further down the Gryffindor table, where he undoubtedly had a full meal already. Weasleys. “Your classmates still a bit dull too, I imagine?”

“A bit,” said Percy, on his guard.

Charlie notices the tension and flaps a hand at him. “Relax, Perce, I’m not here to lecture you. Merlin knows I am not the one to look up to for an example of social abilities. That’ll be our dear William.”

Percy takes a moment to think about this. He supposes it is true, after all: Charlie had always been quiet and reserved, less so than Percy but certainly more so than the rest of the brood. “Maybe the dragons will talk back.”

Charlie nudges him but does not seem to be offended. “Dragonage is a bit like Parseltongue, actually, but it’s said the trainers can learn a bit. Er. Could learn.”

“I’m not an idiot, Charlie,” Percy says, suddenly feeling very old. “I know you’re going to Romania very soon. First Bill, now you. I wonder what England lacks.”

“Adventure, I think,” Charlie says, his voice lower and more serious. “That’s actually what I came to talk to you about. I know Fred and George are here, but you’ve always been closer to us than to them.”

This is an understatement.

“I don’t want you to feel that we are leaving you, Perce. I just—I can’t stay in England right now. Mum wants me to live at home, and I love Gin and Ron, but I just *can’t*, Perce. I can’t

live at the Burrow. I need to figure out who I *am*, and I can't do that with Mum breathing down my neck.*"*

"That I understand," Percy says, with feeling.

Charlie grins, instantly cheered. "I know you would, Perce. You're like me and Bill. You're waiting for an adventure. I hope it happens for you in Hogwarts, but take it from me, it passes before you know it—and you can go chasing your own dragons. Or Sorting Hats," he adds, with a nod to the book lying between them.

"Gryffindor had a sword *and* the Hat, which seems a bit unfair to me," Percy informs him as to not acknowledge the sudden tightening of his throat. Had Charlie been this nice to him the first time around? He can't remember. "There's no agreement on what Slytherin had, but my money's on a snake."

"And the others?"

"A cup, or a chalice of some sort for Hufflepuff," Percy reels off obediently. "And a diadem for Ravenclaw—a crown to give knowledge."

"Maybe that'll be your adventure," Charlie says, voice suddenly grand. "The great diadem of knowledge. Percy Weasley, smartest man in the world. At the very least you could go talk to the Hat. That's pretty easy, I think. All you have to do is ask Professor Dumbledore. It's in his office and there's technically no rule about it. Some seventh years went and chatted with it this year, I think. Identity crises and all."

"Really," Percy says, making a note to ask Landon whether he's tried that yet. "How do I ask Professor Dumbledore?"

Charlie shrugs and swings his gaze up to the Head Table, where the man in question is currently discussing something with Professor McGonagall. "Send him an owl? You've a week left before the train, I bet he'd say yes."

***

Landon reveals that his father has forbidden him to be alone with Albus Dumbledore. Percy cannot actually deny the wisdom of this directive and so, rolling his eyes, sets out to write a letter himself.

***

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

I hope it is not too much of an imposition to ask a favour before the term ends. If possible, I would like to ask the Sorting Hat a few questions about the founding of Hogwarts. I am hoping to incorporate it into a project for my extra tutelage next year. My brother, Charles Weasley, suggested I send a note.

Respectfully,

Percival Weasley

***

Dear Percival,

Please report to my office tomorrow after lunch. The Sorting Hat will be delighted to fulfil a child's curiosity, I am sure.

Warmly,

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore

***

"My dear boy," Professor Dumbledore says as they stand outside a gargoyle. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

"And I yours, Professor Dumbledore," Percy says awkwardly, offering his hand. Dumbledore reels off some ridiculous password— *Sugar Quills*, he memorises for later—and they ascend the marvellous spiral staircase into his office. Percy had been in Dumbledore's office only a few times, namely to ceremoniously receive his Head Boy badge, to report on Sirius Black's break-in, and to be asked, once, to join the Order.

He'd refused, of course. He wonders if he'll be asked in this timeline.

Percy avoids Dumbledore's gaze as they chat briefly about Percy's proposed project. He gives the prepared answer: he is very interested both in different types of magic and the longevity of magic, and what the Founders could have done to infuse the Hat with magic such that it speaks to this day. He thinks this should not raise any red flags, as the topic is actually briefly covered in the fifth year curriculum, and indeed Dumbledore does not seem unduly suspicious.

"And you, my boy? How are you enjoying Hogwarts?"

“Oh, it’s grand, Professor,” Percy responds, trying for boyish enthusiasm of the sort he imagines will placate the old man. “The castle is magnificent and I’m enjoying all my classes.”

“Professor McGonagall has many positive things to say about her young prodigy!” Dumbledore reveals enthusiastically. “Your mother was rather like you. I remember Molly—she was the only one brave enough to request extra training in both Potions and Defence against the Dark Arts her OWL year. She got all Os, if I am remembering correctly.”

Percy...had not known that. He hadn’t requested DADA tutelage, primarily because the professors were all useless, they had a new professor each year, and he didn’t want to display his newfound proficiency at duelling. Perhaps when Professor Lupin returned to teach.

Dumbledore politely leaves after a few more cheerful comments, and Percy approaches the Sorting Hat, suddenly hesitant.

Hello, young hero, the Hat says when Percy finally puts it on. ***How is the progress?***

Steady, Percy thinks back, defensive.

No need to rush, lad, the Hat seems to chuckle. ***You have time, if what I see in your head is correct. Ask what you came to ask.***

Percy collects himself. *I have a few questions, actually. The first: did James Potter and his friends use you to make the Marauder’s Map?*

The Marauder’s Map? The Hat is silent as it presumably scans Percy’s memories. ***Ah. To my knowledge, no, although they did break into the office before they graduated. I believe what you are looking for is the registry, which tracks magical births for all eligible Hogwarts students, which includes families primarily in Europe, though some in Asia and Africa as well.***

Percy had read about the registry and dismissed it because the book hadn’t mentioned it was kept in the office. *Where is it?*

You’d have to break into the Headmaster’s desk, which I would not recommend. Why not use the Map as an anchor for your creation?

You can do that?

The Hat’s laugh reverberates uncomfortably throughout Percy’s head. ***My boy, with magic, you can do nearly anything. Yes, I would recommend that. Was that all?***

No, Percy thinks decisively. *Do you know where the other Founder’s Objects are?*

Yes. Three are in Hogwarts. The rest are not. Aside from that, I cannot tell you more. The hat pauses. ***I would advise you caution, if you are to seek the objects. They are not for trivial use and certainly not for a school project.***

I am not seeking them for a school project.

There is a long silence.

Yes, I imagine you are not.

***

Percy is still thinking about the Hat's warning when he takes the train home for Christmas. Despite himself, he has become intrigued with the idea of seeking out the other objects, if only because he knows the Sword will appear in two years' time. That means that either the diadem, Slytherin's object, or Hufflepuff's cup are in Hogwarts as well. The cup was rumoured to have incredible powers: the ability to create food or potions depending on what the user needed to consume. The diadem, of course, came with wisdom. Presumably, whatever Slytherin created would be useful as well, likely a weapon. Any—or all—would be useful for his quest.

If he was going to hide things in Hogwarts, where would he hide them?

On the train home, he looks at his modified Map, tracing out places where the lines don't seem to add up: hidden compartments, maybe, or secret passageways. He has the summer to puzzle through the Map, make a list of places to start. He has time, though he is uncomfortably aware that time is beginning to run out.

***

This is Charlie's last Christmas at home for many years, and it is clear his older brother knows it. Bill remains in Egypt, though he is able to obtain a permit to Floo for a short call. Percy has to hold Ginny back from trying to climb through once his head disappears. Charlie spends nearly every waking minute in the wide living room, the base of operations for the Weasley family, talking to George and Ron, playing Exploding Snap with Fred, and listening to Ginny's stories. He does not go out of his way to spend time with Percy, but they instead share glances over the heads of their siblings, feeling like soldiers.

Fred and George crow over their traditional first year Weasley sweaters and immediately swap, Fred cavorting around the room in a scarlet G, George with a gold F. Percy has to smile. He watches Ginny and Ron orbit around their older brothers with some fondness, though he has to correct some of the twins' stories about Hogwarts.

"It is *not* a troll, Fred," he says sternly when Ron comes running, white-faced.

Fred grins easily at him. "Then what is it, Percy?"

His lips twitch. Each elder Weasley carefully guards the secret of the Sorting Hat as all older siblings in the Wizarding World do, not willing to let the magic of the first day be spoiled by prior knowledge. “You draw a name out of a hat,” he says, unable to resist some teasing.

“No, no,” Charlie chimes in. “You have to choose between four objects: a gold coin, a thick book, a potted plant, and a new broom.”

“I’d choose the coin,” Ron says immediately. “You can buy all of the other ones with the money.”

Ginny gives her brother a disdainful glance. “You’re such a *Slytherin,* Ron. I’d choose the broom, which is *obviously* Gryffindor.”

Clearly eight is the age of enunciation. Percy shakes head solemnly. “That’s where you’re wrong, Charlie. It shows different objects for everyone. I didn’t see any coins, you know. There’s no way to prepare.”

“You said it was drawing names!”

“He lied, Ron,” George interjects. “Do keep up. I saw four pranks, and I had to choose the best one.”

“I saw four more pranks,” Fred says boastfully. He grins at his twin. “Gave us enough ideas for a month.”

“*You* said it was a troll!”

Charlie holds up his hands, clearly sensing an imminent tantrum from Ron. “Only a few more years, and you’ll see,” he says placatingly. “Now, shall we go for a walk?”

Percy is included in the bundle of jackets and scarves, and he suddenly feels so warm that he thinks he might burst. There will be many more Christmases like this, where he feels as though he is one of many, instead of singular.

***

January 1990

Dear Mr. Smith,

Please forgive my impertinence in writing to you, but I am currently a third year Gryffindor at Hogwarts completing an independent project on the Founders. I spoke to the Fat Friar and he was kind enough to give me some information about your family’s history and connection with Helga Hufflepuff.

In my research, I have learned of a cup, so powerful that it can create food or potions that the user needs. Of course, this is likely a myth, like Gryffindor's sword or Ravenclaw's diadem. I imagine that if any person were to know if the cup was real, it would be you, or somebody in your esteemed family.

If you have any information, I would be eternally grateful. I am researching the magic used by the Founders in creating these wonderful legacies.

Best,

Percival Weasley

***

Horatio Smith's letter is enlightening. He believes passionately that his mother had the cup of which the legends speak, but he never saw it himself. His mother, he claims, was murdered, and he believes the cup was stolen then.

The angry, slightly incoherent tenor of the letter indicates why this tale is not more widely believed. Percy looks into Madam Hepzibah Smith's death and sees that most believe the aging, decrepit house elf is to blame. Percy has never owned a house elf, but aren't house elves meant to be loyal to their owners?

Because the Sorting Hat has already confirmed the existence of the cup, furthermore, Percy is inclined to believe Horatio's account. It's a simple logic puzzle: descendant of Hufflepuff has the cup (and, if Horatio is to be believed, "at least one other Founder's legacy"). Descendant of Hufflepuff is open about her ownership of this object. Somebody kills her and steals it.

The question is, *who.*

Percy has a suspicion, but Tom Riddle is hardly the only bogeyman of the Wizarding World, and the dates don't seem to line up. 1961? Tom Riddle graduated in 1945 and presumably started work immediately, although Percy has no conclusive proof of this. Ideally, he'd talk to Burke himself, but he can't think of a way to reach out to a Dark proprietor without raising several alarms, particularly now that Snape is watching him more closely. But from all accounts, Tom was not rich, and Percy is still convinced the man would have secured his immortality immediately. Why would he wait sixteen years to make another Horcrux?

Percy shakes his head, realising he's gone ahead of himself. There is no proof that Riddle is even involved, nor evidence to suggest the cup is a Horcrux. To defile such an ancient artefact is inconceivable. If Tom was the thief, he may have just wanted the cup for his own purposes.

Or, more likely, Tom is not involved at all.

Regardless, the third object in Hogwarts is either the diadem or the locket. Percy has a suspicion that Tom would have taken the locket if it were at Hogwarts, which means it must be the diadem that remains at Hogwarts. Therefore, he needs to find out more about the Ravenclaw family.

Percy shakes his head, making a note on a mental list that has grown far too long. It feels like he is missing something, but he can't even begin to figure out *what*. Sometimes it feels like this entire thing is a puzzle, and it'll all unwind if he doesn't have the right assumptions to start with, but how in Merlin's name could he know that before it all becomes too late?

***

Landon frowns. “The Grey Lady never—well, she never speaks.”

“How can she never speak?”

The other boy shrugs. “She never speaks, I’m telling you. She just, I dunno, floats around and looks mysterious.”

“Do you know who she is? Like her real name?”

Landon scoffs. “Mate, we really only see her at the Sorting and the Leaving Feast. We don’t typically have long *chats* about her life.”

Percy bites his lip as he thinks. “Well, if I wanted to summon her, what would I do?”

“Stand in the moonlight and incant her name?”

Percy gives this an appropriate glower.

Landon grins. “Aren’t you chummy with your House ghost? Ask him, he’s friendly enough, I hear. I’ll come too.”

The Gryffindor ghost is much more accessible—and predictable—than the Ravenclaw one. Nearly Headless Nick is sunning himself at the end of the Gryffindor table nearest to the staff table, which is, by mutual agreement, typically left empty as a buffer between whatever staff is on duty during off-meal hours and whatever students are taking advantage of the long, communal tables in the middle of the day.

“Young Percival Weasley!” Nick says as they approach. Percy has to give Nearly Headless Nick at least that: he memorises the name of every Gryffindor student before the end of the first month, which Percy always felt was a proper thing for a House ghost to do. “How may I be of assistance?”

Landon opens his mouth but Percy trods on his foot. Flattery first, he’s learned through his experience with ghosts.

“We are doing a project on the Founders,” Percy says, “And we felt the best place to start would be by asking you about Gryffindor House, Sir Nicholas.”

Nick preens and sits up. Landon and Percy eye the neck, but the ghost’s head remains intact. “Certainly, my dear boys. Sit, sit. I have been at Hogwarts for many years, and none know more about Gryffindor than I! A brave man, a daring man, a duellist like no other; yes, Godric Gryffindor is an example of a noble wizard to us all, I daresay.”

Percy privately feels that the adulation of Godric Gryffindor is a bit overdone. His research, if one reads between the effusive lines, turns up a picture of a man desperate to be the leader, turning on his best friend for his views, dominating the two female founders. Percy is a Gryffindor, but he hardly thinks *bravery* would be his choice for a preferred quality.

“Percival, I am sure you know this story,” Nick continues. “‘Bold Gryffindor, from wild moor…’ Born in England, in fact, in what is now known as Godric’s Hollow.” The ghost leans forward and winks. “Our esteemed headmaster hails also from Godric’s Hollow, you know! Once a small village, now an esteemed town. Godric was a headstrong boy, strong and fierce and daring. He believed everyone should be admitted into Hogwarts, though we of course know he most wanted others like himself: brave and true to heart.”

Landon snickers and nudges Percy, who has been momentarily distracted by Dumbledore also being from *Godric’s Hollow*. Perhaps his family descends from the Gryffindors? “Brave and true to heart, are you?”

“Why was his hat chosen to be the Sorting Hat?” Percy asks, ignoring the other boy.

Nick doffs his own pearly hat before swiping it off his head and presenting it to Percy. “The story goes, the Founders could not decide on how to admit students into the school. Godric was not one for discussion, so he took matters into his own hands—or hat, as it were. An inspiring story, I think, don’t you agree? There is a time and place for discussion and a time and place to act!”

“What about Lady Ravenclaw?” Landon interjects after Percy, feeling a bit awkward, copies his earlier nudge. It feels odd to casually touch a peer like this, but Percy has noticed, for all of Landon’s undoubtedly haughty upbringing, that the other boy is constantly brushing by Percy or placing a hand on his shoulder or giving him false punches to his upper arms. “I’ve never spoken to our House ghost, you see, Sir Nicholas. I would be honoured if you could give me any information.”

Nick peers closely at Landon before responding. To Percy’s surprise, the ghost motions them closer and drops his voice. “Not much is known about Lady Ravenclaw,” he says quietly. “Born in Scotland to nobility, I believe. She was intelligent and creative, of course, and believed strongly in the power of knowledge. Legend says she enchanted a diadem to pass on wisdom, but it was stolen, and she died of heartbreak from the loss.”

Percy and Landon exchange wide eyed looks. None of their research turned up this story.

“Who stole it?” Percy asks when it becomes apparent Nick is not continuing the story.

Nick shifts uncomfortably. “It is only rumour, dear boy, nothing more—”

“Of course, Sir Nicholas,” Landon cuts in neatly. He smiles up at the floating head. “We seek only rumour and legend, for one of the great tragedies of our time is that knowledge of our esteemed founders has been lost. We can only rely on pillars of the Wizarding community like you to tell us what you know.”

Percy will never admit to anyone that he is jealous of Landon’s perfect pureblood enunciation, the way he can morph from joking teenager to polished scion. Even his posture changes when he addresses Nick, his head tilted to be both respectful and proud. Watching him, Percy decides to once again ask Aunt Muriel if he can stay for a week that summer to learn more about what it once meant to be a Prewett.

His manners seem to work favourably on Nick, who drops his voice even lower. “I have heard it was her own daughter,” he breathes, sending a chill over his audience. “Stolen from Ravenclaw Manor. Lady Ravenclaw begged for her daughter to return, but there was pride on both sides, and Lady Ravenclaw died without ever reuniting with her daughter…or retrieving the diadem, which has been lost to us.”

“Would the Grey Lady tell us, do you think?” Percy asks, his mind whizzing. The diadem was stolen, but perhaps it made its twisting way back to Hogwarts. Who would have returned it? The daughter, perhaps, repentant at her theft? Another descendent? If it was hidden by the daughter, it would be in the oldest part of the castle, in a chamber that existed in the eleventh century.

“If you seek her out, you must be respectful,” Nick counsels, his voice suddenly stern. “Not all House ghosts are as friendly as the Friar and I!” The ghost hesitates and then continues quietly, “I would avoid speaking to the Baron unless absolutely necessary. We know quite a lot about the Slytherin line; I would imagine the library has most of the answers you seek. Of course, he has the fabled Chamber of Secrets, but that is only a myth.”

It occurs to Percy suddenly that the ghost is lying. The Chamber of Secrets was opened at least once before, during Riddle’s time at Hogwarts. The ghosts would know that. Perhaps they swore to lie to the students who came after, not wanting to frighten them. They must not know where the Chamber is, for Percy couldn’t imagine any of the ghosts keeping silent during the scare at Hogwarts in a few years. How did Riddle hide from the army of ghosts floating through the halls?

Landon and Percy thank Nick and move further down the table, consolidating their notes. Percy does not share his suspicions of the diadem’s location, nor his plans to seek out the Grey Lady. He’s close; he can feel it.

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March 1990

Percy is nearly to the end of *Evil Moste Fowle* when he finally sees the word Horcrux in print.

One of the darkest Magicks in our world, says the dark and spindly text. Percy freezes in his bed, checking his hangings to make sure they are closed and warded. Heart racing, he continues to read. *To create a Horcrux is to split asunder the very Essence of Man and can only be achieved with the most Unforgivable act, the Murder of an Innocent…*

On the page opposite, a jagged drawing of a man screams in eternal agony, his chest ripped in half. Percy cannot tell if he is meant to be the innocent murdered or the man whose soul is, apparently, leaving its body.

Fingers brushing over the text, he takes it a step further. What can be created can be destroyed; what can be sickened can be healed; what can be imagined can be given physical cast. Is that not the theory of magic he has learned over the last three years? Magic has balance, meaning. Therefore, if he can guess at what would create a Horcrux, he can guess at what would destroy one.

Perhaps one could unite the soul again—but to do that would require some negation of the act of murder, which as far as Percy understands it, is impossible. Bringing the person to life is perhaps the logical opposite of the creation ritual, but impractical for his purposes.

Perhaps one could destroy the vessel in such a way that one destroys the soul. The spell must force the soul to take on the properties of the vessel. Again, magic has *rules*. Percy thinks of a diary, vulnerable, crumbling to ash. If one destroys the diary completely, he hypothesises, one would destroy the soul fragment therein.

In fact, he muses, it is unlikely the act of embedding the soul in a vessel provides the *vessel* with extra protection. Autonomy, perhaps; power, almost certainly. But protection? The enchanter undeniably would protect the vessel themselves, but those protections would be separate from any soul magic. Percy can figure out how to break a normal curse or ward, given enough time. There are ways of destroying things beyond magical repair. Fiendfyre, for one. He'll have to research the others.

He thinks again of fire licking up the pages of the diary, burning it to dust, and feels some satisfaction.

It's like the portkey, after all, dust caked into his shoes. Once the portkey comes apart it loses its magic. A soul cannot exist in ashes.

Percy closes the book and gazes up at the ceiling. He won't be able to destroy the diary right away; he will first have to see if the spectre of Tom Riddle can be tempted into giving away information on the other Horcruxes. But after he's finished with it? He'll turn the whole book into ash and spread them all over the world, daring Tom Riddle's soul to lay another finger on his family.

***

That night, an idea begins to grow, lurking in the back of his mind as he drifts off into self-righteous sleep.

Magic has balance. What can be created can be destroyed. What can be broken can be repaired. What can be imagined can be created.

***

June 1990

The term draws to a close.

Snape purses his lips at Percy's final tutelage and pronounces his perfect potion barely adequate. "I expect you to *think*, this summer," he says after Percy finishes wiping down his station. "Do not bother returning if you do not."

"I aim always to please, professor," Percy says quite cheerfully, still pleased at *barely adequate*. For Snape, that is effusive.

Professor McGonagall is considerably more friendly. She sets him what will undoubtedly be a long and fascinating essay on the differences between live and inert transfiguration and even provides him with a book from her own collection. Percy stares at *The Principles of Self Transfiguration* and is suddenly deeply impatient for fourth year to start. After all, one can begin animagus training at fourteen.

At Charlie's graduation, Percy is pleased to see Charlie and Tonks side by side throughout the celebration, both grinning widely. When his mother begins wondering aloud about their relationship, Percy even manages to stop her with a well-placed comment about letting Charlie live his own life.

(Sometimes, this life feels so much *easier* than the last. His task is, at times, seemingly impossible; but all of his old petty concerns, questions of whether his peers like him, or whether he will secure an adequate job after graduation, are much less prominent in his thoughts than they had been the first time).

He sits with his brothers on the train ride home, and as he turns his attention to the gleaming walls of King's Cross, he feels energised for the first time in many months.

What can be created can be destroyed, and by Merlin, he is going to destroy the Dark Lord.

TRANSFORMATIONS

Chapter Notes

I'm glad I posted Chapter 3 when I could because this week was crazy!! Going to try to post Ch 5 as soon as I can.

Thanks for the feedback on the last few chapters! Like I said, I had zero intention of posting this when I wrote it (mostly because I figured I'd never finish it), so it's super fun (and scary) to hear what other people think.

Happy (early) Easter to anyone that celebrates!

All of the family drama that Andromeda references in this chapter is loosely pulled from the Harry Potter wiki, so I can't be too sure where it all originated. I liked the broad strokes of the story that seemed to be implied in the wiki pages, so I took the basic outlines of those characters to fill in some of the extra detail.

CHAPTER FOUR: TRANSFORMATIONS

1990 — 1991 (Percy is 14 & 27, Snape has, to his secret chagrin, reached 30, Harry is 10, and the twins are entering their second year)

June 1990

When Percy greets the summer solstice this year, he wishes aloud for victory and strength and decisiveness. Aunt Muriel’s laugh is loud and wide, and she wishes again for a worthy heir. They move inside for breakfast, their hair still warm from the blazing sun.

The decrepit Prewett house elf serves them eggs, toast, and sliced fruit. A breakfast without his siblings and parents all shouting at each other, where a house elf provides extra toast without being asked? Still glad in his green summer robes, Percy feels as though he can be the heir that his great-aunt wants him to be.

She seems to agree. Her agenda for this fortnight is packed: meetings with whatever remnants of Wizarding Society still agrees to meet with the Weasley-Prewetts, history lessons, an introduction to the old rituals and manners and etiquette, and a trip to Diagon Alley to purchase some new robes.

(Not many; Percy is a gangly thirteen, weeks away from fourteen, and Aunt Muriel correctly and cruelly predicts he will shoot up like a weed in the coming months. Still, even walking through the tailor's shop, looking at styles—instead of fishing robes out of the used bin at Gladrags—Percy can imagine himself in these sharp robes, black and deep maroon and emerald green, walking with intention through the Ministry).

"We are meeting Andromeda Tonks, née Black, today," Aunt Muriel announces after the house elf clears the table and replaces food with tea. Breakfast is conducted in a companionable silence accompanied with newspapers, while postprandial tea is reserved for strategizing and discussion. Percy thoroughly enjoys every second of it. Sometimes it feels like his head is too loud, like his environment is too crazy, like everything is happening far too often all the time, so any chance that he has to re-establish a sense of peace, quiet, or calm is precious to him.

"Her daughter just graduated Hogwarts? Hufflepuff, soon to be an Auror?"

Aunt Muriel looks pleased at Percy's knowledge of his peers. Percy has never spent too much time noticing his classmates, but his great-aunt has impressed upon him the importance of networking.

"Yes. Your grandmother, Cedrella, was one of Andromeda's aunts," Aunt Muriel continues. She purses her lips. "Andromeda was disowned from her family for marrying a Muggle-born instead of the Lestrange heir, it was all very embarrassing for the family. Cedrella was fond of Andromeda, of course; Cedrella married Septimus Weasley, your grandfather, against the explicit wishes of her parents. *She* supported your mother abandoning *her* family for your father. Andromeda was just the next young girl she wanted to protect."

Percy does not defend his mother, though he feels as though that description is a *tad* unfair. Talking back to Aunt Muriel is an unproductive venture, particularly where his mother is concerned.

"Regardless, we stay in touch; she remains rather well respected, though of course she cannot travel in the same circles as her sister, Narcissa."

"Is she a blood traitor, then?" Percy asks, thinking of the conversation they had last year about abandoning one's family.

"Of course," Aunt Muriel says dismissively. "Though she at least taught her daughter in accordance with her family's ways, so she remains committed to the tradition, if not her blood relatives." She sniffs loudly, her nose wrinkling nearly to its stem. "Her blood relatives are all Death Eaters, and to be *completely* honest, her mother was not right in the head, so we can excuse her…willful behaviour."

Percy has to hide a smile. Aunt Muriel lives by a set of rules governing acceptable behaviour that does not *always* hold up to logic but seems to have the right idea, in the end. Percy has found that for all her bluster, Auntie Muriel cares less for blood than she does for blood relations, or for the strict rules that hold up pureblood society.

Andromeda Tonks, when they arrive at her doorstep a few hours later, looks like the type of woman that Aunt Muriel would approve of: tall, foreboding, stern. The effect is ruined slightly by her daughter's exuberance when she bounds out from behind Aunt Muriel and grabs Percy's hand.

"Hello, Percy!" Tonks—the younger—greets him enthusiastically. "How are you? How's Charlie?"

Aunt Muriel's disapproval is clear. Andromeda Tonks ignores her daughter and looks down her forbidding face at Percy, who suddenly feels very certain that the older woman is from the future and knows how Percy fails his family, how he indirectly leads to her daughter's death in just a few short years. She may not know the details, but Andromeda is clearly the type of woman who can see you just as you are. He feels naked, aware of his stubby teenaged body, his clear inadequacy written across his pimpled face.

He straightens and tries to project strength, meeting her eyes solidly. He isn't that person anymore, though it pains him to admit that person lingers just out of reach. He's changed; he's had three years in his new life fighting to right his wrongs.

Some of this conviction must show on his face, for Madam Tonks finally nods and extends a smooth hand.

***

"Percival wishes to learn more about his *paternal* family," Aunt Muriel says when they are seated in the Tonks' living room over tea. Theodore Tonks, Muggleborn, is nowhere to be found.

Nymphadora "call me Tonks, or I shan't speak to you" shoots him a mocking glance at *Percival.* He lifts an eyebrow in response, hoping to convey an equally dismissive *Nymphadora.*

Madam Tonks nods slowly. "I imagine you are here for the Black side of your family?" Percy has never considered himself to have a Black side of the family. Madam Tonks looks impatient. "You are merely two generations removed from being a Black. That is a legitimate, albeit diluted, claim to the bloodline."

"Yes," he responds, thinking of the way *a legitimate claim to the bloodline* sounds. "Yes, I'm here to learn about the Blacks."

"Cedrella was a strong-willed woman," Madam Tonks says, a marginal amount of warmth stealing into her voice. "She and I were very similar; both middle daughters, both disowned for our marriages. After my family disowned me, she became like a second mother to me."

Aunt Muriel nods in agreement, no trace of her earlier disdain. “Strong-willed she was, that’s for certain,” she says with a cackle. “Took quite a lot of will to go against Arcturus, let me tell you!”

Madam Tonks nods in agreement. “I never met Arcturus, but his eldest daughter, Charis, was said to be his spitting image, and she was fearsome. She married Caspar Crouch, who by all accounts was a cruel, unforgiving man. Cedrella had a younger sister as well, Callidora, who married into the Longbottom family.”

Percy had never known his family was so closely related to the Crouch and Longbottom families, both well-regarded in Magical Britain. “Why did nobody tell me?”

Aunt Muriel understands his question instantly. “Cedrella was strong-willed, and she was not forgiving. She never spoke to her sisters after they turned their back on her.”

Percy opens his mouth to protest this, but he closes it after a second. He can easily see how that situation would arise. It is so *unfair*, sometimes, that these petty family squabbles can propagate through generations, far past the time of the original offense. Why ought he be punished, be denied knowledge of his heritage and legacy, merely for an old witch's ancient pride?

Madam Tonks is watching him carefully. “It is surprisingly easy to step away from your siblings, once you are ready to leave the house,” she says, her voice a warning. “To never look back.”

Percy finds he wants to duck his eyes away, but he struggles to hold her gaze, wondering how many families were torn apart by these squabbles, how many siblings never spoke over issues of prestige and power and purity.

“Your father thought very highly of his mother,” Aunt Muriel says, picking up the thread. “Septimus Weasley was a spineless wizard, so she did most of the rearing.”

Madam Tonks looks disapproving, picking up her cup of tea as if to soften the impact of her rebuke. “Spineless, perhaps, but never cruel.”

Aunt Muriel waves a dismissive hand. “Spineless,” she reiterates. “Lost all of the Weasley money, and all but three of his sons. Seven of them in total, you know.”

Percy tries to imagine losing four of his siblings and has to swallow against a lump in his throat. Perhaps he had been too harsh to his parents. After all, he'd sent himself back in time for the crime of losing just one sibling. His mother had lost both of her brothers, and his father four. But in a way, the parallels to his own situation rankle him even further. He'd *destroyed* his life, or one version of it, to right his wrongs. What measures were his parents taking? His brothers had not hesitated to flee—Bill to Egypt, Charlie to Romania, Fred and George soon from Hogwarts entirely. Perhaps what the Weasleys inherited from their parents was the instinct to run away, to try and make their own life for themselves, away from anyone who'd known them.

“I have some books of Black history that I gave to my daughter, who never deigned to open them,” Madam Tonks says pointedly.

The younger Tonks rolls her eyes. “They’re impossibly long,” she confides in Percy. “Chapters and chapters of this marriage and that marriage, detailed lists of family artefacts. Dunno why anyone would want to read them."

“I’d love to,” Percy says, still thinking about a legitimate claim to a family he hadn’t known he had, of artefacts in vaults tied to dead heirs, about the set way his mother clenched her jaw before she stormed out of the room.

***

After the stifling tea, Tonks and Percy escape to her bedroom, Percy following hesitantly behind. She shuts the door firmly and turns to face him. “Thank you,” she says without preamble.

“I’m sorry?” Percy is not used to being thanked.

“Thank you for talking to Charlie,” she says slowly, as if he is thick. “He told me what you said to him. It’s a great comfort to him, you know, that he has one sibling he can count on.”

Percy flushes and deflects. “Does he not count on Bill?”

Tonks rolls her eyes and flops down on the bed. “Charlie likes Bill, but he’d never *confide* in him,” she reveals casually. “Don’t you know your own brothers?”

Percy is reeling at the idea that Charlie thinks he can confide in *Percy* but not *Bill*. “Bill and I were never too close,” he says truthfully, hovering awkwardly in the room. Tonks' only chair is covered with discarded robes that look—and smell—sweaty and heavily used. “He’s several years older than me.”

“You seem older than just a fourth year,” Tonks says. “I can see why Charlie likes you so much. Anyway, I just wanted to thank you in person. It was *dreadful* fighting with him. And I’m ever so excited for him to go to Romania! You know how pants he is at writing; we’ll have to share our letters to make sure we get all the news.”

Percy finds to his surprise that he doesn’t hate the idea of writing to Tonks, at least about Charlie. “And you, er, you’re to be an Auror?”

She beams proudly. “My mum hates the idea, but I want to do my bit, you know? And I’ll definitely ace Stealth and Disguise. I’m a bit worried about Potions, but I did get the grades for it, I just get nervous brewing.”

“I’m taking tutelage from Snape,” he says, enjoying the way her eyes widen. “Let me know if I can help at all.”

“Cor, you’re braver than I ever will be,” Tonks says, laughing. “You should consider being an Auror when you’re done. What are your best subjects?”

“Transfiguration is my favourite,” he says, before an idea strikes him. Somehow it never gets easier to think of things to say, even to someone like Tonks, who is around his true mental age, so when he arrives at a good topic of conversation he can't let it go to waste. “I’m supposed to be working on an essay about self-transfiguration. I’m hoping to be an animagus. I bet you know all about it.”

She grins easily at him and taps the side of her nose. A second later, there’s a bird in her place, preening. A pop later and she’s back, her hair the same brilliant brown as the bird’s plumage. “It was easy for me, but I’ll help in any way I can,” she says. “Transfiguration is my favourite too. Sit, won't you?"

Percy sits at the very edge of her bed, and she turns to smile brilliantly at him. And with that, Percy has the odd feeling that he’s made another friend. Possibly his...fifth, if they’re counting both timelines.

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August 1990

Charlie leaves. Bill rowed with his parents for days to get their approval; he brandished glowing reviews of the program, his letters of recommendation for the full scholarship he received, and his stellar NEWT scores as proof that he was, in fact, intelligent and he was not, in fact, acting impulsively. Their mother brandished her wand right back and threatened to stick him to his bed by force, their father teared up at the thought of the eldest leaving, and the other siblings were quiet in the aftermath as the first real power struggle of the Burrow occurred.

Charlie packs up his things, leaves a note with a smoky drawing of a dragon on the kitchen table, and flies away in the night with nary an argument.

(It has been ingrained in the elder Weasleys, at least, born while the war was still on, when people could disappear in the night and their families would never know: *always leave a note)*.

Percy is the first to find it. His mother is outside coaxing the chickens, his father is humming away in the shower, and none of the younger brood deign to awaken before seven.

He traces the dragon, who snorts inky fire at him. It’s a clever charm. Not many people can say they’ve had a passion since birth, but Charlie seemed to spring from the womb itching for

dragons. Percy has many of Charlie's dragons tucked away upstairs—all the siblings do—though none as sophisticated as this.

"Charlie's gone, Mother," he says pre-emptively as she enters the kitchen. Years of experience has taught him that it's best to tell her the bad news first. "Dragons. Romania, actually."

Her eyes swing to the clock. *Travelling*, it says helpfully. "Oh, he *thinks* he is," she says, gearing herself up for a holler. "Arthur!"

Arthur Weasley remains, safely, in the shower.

"I think it'll be good for him," Percy says awkwardly, unsure of how to stick his neck out for his siblings, but willing to try for Charlie.

"*Do* you," Molly snaps, clearly uninterested in his response. "I'm sure Bill put him up to this," she mutters to herself, turning. "Romania. Imagine! *Arthur!"*

If anything, Arthur's warbling tenor increases in volume as he launches into the latest Celestina Warbeck single.

Percy tries again. "He really likes dragons, Mother. And the Romania program, from what he's told me, is really quite renowned."

"I've had enough of these *renowned programs*. First Egypt, now Romania." Molly turns abruptly to tower over Percy, a feat she accomplishes not by virtue of height but by sheer determination. "If you even *think* about going to a program out of the country, I will summon you home so fast your head spins!"

"I quite like Britain, Mother," Percy says, injured. "I have no desire to flee to other countries, I can assure you of that. Anyway, you know I want to work in the Ministry." (To prevent the rise of a Dark Lord, of course).

This breaks some of her ire, and she begins moving around with purpose instead of anger, placing the eggs on the counter and summoning a large frying pan. "Do you really think it will be good for him?"

Molly and Percy had never reached the stage where they could navigate an adult relationship, even after the war. Percy had never believed that Molly forgave him for Fred's death, or for his own desertion. He therefore worries his bottom lip for a few seconds before he responds, trying to project *calm* and *adult* (and, as always, not *time traveller*). "Yes, I do. Charlie doesn't like working with people; he likes animals. It doesn't mean he'll live there forever, I imagine. Just that he wants a few years of the lakes and the mountains and the dragons before he can move home. Hogwarts was a bit claustrophobic, I think."

Molly turns and smiles at him, and Percy flushes to his ears. "I can understand that," she says confidentially. "Before I met your father I wanted to study at a duelling academy in France."

The idea that his mother had wanted to *study duelling* —and that his father had apparently prevented that ambition—stymies Percy. “Why…why didn’t you go?”

Her eyes are a shade sad when she turns back to the hissing oil. “The war began here, and I didn’t think I really needed to go to France to duel. But don’t worry, young man, I’ve still got it.”

Bellatrix Lestrange, dead on the floor.

“I don’t doubt it,” Percy murmurs, feeling cold.

***

With Charlie gone, Percy becomes the de-facto older brother. He tries to remember what he’d done the first time around and has a hazy memory of long days locked in his room, buried in a book and feeling very neglected.

To his surprise, he finds that merely sitting in the main room after meals is enough to entice his younger siblings to spend time with him. Even the twins cannot cause chaos every second of every day, and Percy and George spend several enjoyable hours sketching the flora and fauna of the Burrow. George is quieter than Fred, and more thoughtful, and Percy feels a pang of guilt when he realised he never learned to think of them separately in his mind until after Fred became *my fault he is dead* and George became simply *grief.*

Even Ginny will flop next to him and sigh loudly, waiting to be asked about her latest drama. Percy remembers Ginny as a quiet child and an explosive adult, but this timeline’s Ginny always seems to be fighting some battle: against their mother, who wants her to cut her hair; against Ron, who is acting stuck-up; against Luna, who only wants to play made-up games; against the heat, which prevents Quidditch.

At this last, Percy is struck by an idea and spends the next few days constructing Ginny a small Quidditch pitch out of transfigured leaves. He presents it, feeling awkward—but Ginny gasps in delight and rushes forward to poke at the minuscule players zooming around. Percy, in a fit of previously unseen sentimentality, enchants tiny versions of each family member, and a generic blonde that he deems Luna.

“This one’s you,” he says, pointing at a Chaser with long hair and a purple jumper. “I can change the colour when you get Sorted.”

“Who’s the blue one, then?” Ginny adroitly snatches him out of the air and Percy suddenly has a mild panic attack: was Ginny a Seeker or a Chaser? He never attended any of her games, so he can’t be certain.

“Make a Ravenclaw friend, will you? So I don’t have to change the colour.”

“Ron wants to be in Ravenclaw,” Ginny mentions idly, releasing tiny Percy to zoom around with the rest of them.

“Does he?”

Ginny looks up at the sheer terror in his voice. “What, do you not want him there? Best tell him soon, then, so he doesn’t get too attached to the idea.”

“Why in Merlin’s name would he want to be a *Ravenclaw*?”

Ron is the consummate Gryffindor: brash, bold, brawny, and brave, not to mention stubborn, stocky, and a bit short sighted. Of all his siblings, none seem less suited for Ravenclaw. Even the twins displayed a frustrating ability that seemed to preclude scholastic aptitude and yet enable fantastic creations, particularly in their later years.

Ginny shrugs. “Beats me. It does make you think, though. What’s so good about Gryffindor anyway? I already know I’m brave. I think I could be ambitious. I want to play for the Harpies, you know.”

Oh, Merlin, he’s changed the entire fucking timeline. Ron is going to be a *Ravenclaw,* and Ginny is going to be, from the sounds of it, a *Slytherin,* and everyone will die because Percy is too idiotic to be worth anything at all.

“Please don’t be a Slytherin, Ginevra,” Percy says with some force. “Promise me. Not Slytherin.”

She widens her eyes at him. “Yeah, *Percival*, they’re all prats anyway. I’m just *saying*.”

“How brave of you,” Percy says, nonsensically. “I’ve got to go talk to Ron. Please excuse me.”

“Excused,” she calls after him mockingly as he flees.

Merlin.

***

Ron scuffs a toe in the dirt and Percy has to restrain the urge to chastise him for dirtying his things. There are larger problems at hand.

"I dunno," he says, not meeting Percy's eyes. "It's just—everyone *else* is in Gryffindor. And it's not like I'm not smart, even if I reckon you all think I'm an idiot."

"Ravenclaw is about more than being smart," Percy says automatically before he refocuses. He isn't sure how to proceed, not wanting to alienate his brother but desperately needing Ron to change his mind. "Anybody in any house can be smart."

"Or brave," Ron points out, too wisely for his ten years.

Percy can't actually argue with that, due to his general disbelief in the inherent concept of Sorting Houses, but persevere he must. "A house isn't about whether you're more brave or smart," he tries. "It's about who you want to live with for seven years. How you want to be *seen*."

Ron shrugs again, weakly. “But living in Gryffindor would be just like living here, at the Burrow.”

Once again, Percy cannot strictly argue with this, but he tries anyway for the sake of the entire Wizarding World. “I know the Burrow can be stifling, sometimes, but at Gryffindor you’ll be living with ten or so other first years. You may see Fred, George or I in the Common Room, and Ginny when she also sorts Gryffindor, but you’ll have space for your own life.”

Ron mulls this over. Part of Percy wants to shake his youngest brother and tell him that he will be the most famous of all Weasleys, that he will achieve more than any of the other brothers can ever hope, that his name will be known across the Wizarding World in just seven years. In both lifetimes, Percy has come to terms with this, if only barely.

“I promise,” Percy says, with that future in mind. “I promise that at Hogwarts you will do great things, Ronald. Whatever house you choose, but I think Gryffindor is the right house for you. I promise.”

***

September 1990

He returns for his fourth year and goes to Snape’s office before breakfast on the second day. Snape’s door is open, likely to resolve any last minute scheduling requests. Percy waits patiently until a boy in his year— *Avery, future Death Eater, kills three in a raid on Hogsmeade,* his mind whispers—scurries out and down to the Great Hall.

Snape looks up. “Can I help you, Mr. Weasley?”

“I wish to speak about increasing the frequency of my Potions tutelage,” Percy asks politely. He wants to begin cultivating Snape, as well; Percy has made less progress than he perhaps would have liked, and he knows he may need an ally in Hogwarts when it comes to it.

Snape sniffs. “You were barely adequate,” he comments, looking Percy up and down with a smooth, languid gesture. “Pray tell why I should suffer your presence more than once a fortnight?”

“I wish to improve.”

Snape stands and moves from behind his desk, hands folded behind him. “You have no friends, Mr. Weasley. Are you aware?”

Percy very narrowly resists the urge to roll his eyes. If *one* more professor deems it necessary to speak to Percy about his social life, he may do something he later regrets. “I have friends, Professor.”

“You are smarter than your peers,” Snape continues. It is not a compliment; rather, he states it as fact. “They resent you.”

Percy thinks of Landon, thinks of Mariana, thinks of Oliver. “Some do,” he allows. “People resent what they do not understand.”

Snape smiles thinly and without amusement. “Wise words from a fourteen year old, Mr. Weasley.”

“I am wise beyond my years, sir,” Percy says, and it is only half-sarcastic. He’s found he can get away with saying things like this to Snape if nobody else is in earshot, particularly if he keeps his face entirely innocent and does not give on that he suspects Snape finds him amusing.

“I see very few students in your position,” Snape continues without giving any indication that he’d heard. “Students like you must make a choice, Mr. Weasley, and soon. If one wishes to have friends, wish to have happy visits to Hogsmeade and frivolous dates and other teenage nonsense, one must give up one’s drive.”

Percy does not disagree.

“If one wants to be great, one must work on it every second of the day,” Snape continues, and his voice is suddenly soft and dangerous. “One must commit to greatness.”

Percy meets Snape’s eyes. They both know what he is going to choose.

***

Thus bolstered, Percy tries McGonagall next.

During their customary session on Thursday nights, Percy brings up Animagus training. “I researched it,” he says quickly, before she can decline. “One may begin at fourteen as long as one has a licensed instructor—which I do—and parental permission—which I can get.”

McGonagall’s face twitches into a smile. Of all of his professors, Percy likes McGonagall best, perhaps because she always seems to respect that he likes to learn, or that she never hesitates to bring the calibre of his lessons higher and higher. “I thought you might ask,” she says warmly. “Your essay was well-written and well-researched. I am willing to supervise the

discovery phase at the very least. Not everyone has the aptitude to become an Animagus. It requires knowledge of one's soul."

Percy blinks. "Knowledge, Professor?"

She nods, her voice thoughtful. "Not everyone agrees with that, if you read the published theory, as I'm sure you have. I've taught many students to become Animagi, however, and those who were unsuccessful—despite proficiency in Transfiguration, despite interest and motivation—were those who lacked insight into themselves."

"Because the form reflects the person," Percy completes. He had looked into it after their conversation the previous year, though to his frustration the literature on soul magic is rather shallow. "Like a Patronus."

The professor nods, likely remembering the same conversation they'd had. "Yes, though a Patronus is fundamentally different. A Patronus is a charm; it is temporary, it is magic conjured out of the self, it is a reflection of your current state. Ask Professor Flitwick about why a charm is a charm and not a hex or a curse or a spell. An Animagus, on the other hand, is a transformation. It is permanent, in that your form will never change, merely age. Animagus forms reflect more than your current state; they access the very essence of your being and use that as a transformative force."

"A transformative force?"

McGonagall chuckles. "You should know this by now, Mr. Weasley. All transfigurations rely on a transformative force. Why do we start with transfigurations from wood to stone or silver to gold?"

This is basic theory. "Transfigurations between similar materials have congruence—often called *resonance*. Properties of the material aid the transfiguration and thus require less magic from the caster," he responds promptly. A second later, "oh, I see. Those properties generate the transformative force."

"Precisely," McGonagall continues. "In self-transfiguration, as we will cover in the sixth year curriculum, we provide that force entirely ourselves—through our wands, magic, and intent. This is why self-transfiguration is fundamentally different than other types of transfiguration. An Animagus transformation requires that we provide that force ourselves without our wands and only with our intent. In my experience, however, motivation or magical ability is not enough. We must find resonance with ourselves."

In the last timeline, Percy probably would have responded to this with a bit of derision. Finding resonance with oneself sounds like something his mother would read in the *Witch Weekly*. In this timeline, however, Percy has spent four years thinking about souls and is very ready to accept this theory as fact.

"I can do it," he says confidently. He knows his own soul. He's had to, by now.

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October 1990

Percy has gathered up enough courage to try a few of the tamer Dark spells in the book. It's funny; some Dark spells seem almost harmless, like those meant to tame a frightened cow for milking or slaughter. Percy grew up on a farm; he is not sentimental about farm animals losing their life when necessary. His mother employs a Light variant of the spell to put down chickens every week.

The difference seems so arbitrary, sometimes. A quintessential Light spell is *Lumos*; taken to its extreme, a Lumos can blind someone, like looking into the sun for too long. Why is that not considered Dark?

Perhaps the distinction is merely political, rather than magical.

This conviction leads Percy to try just a few small spells. One, he casts on Scabbers, feeling a bit guilty; he sends the rat instantly into an enchanted sleep. For others, he returns to his old nemesis, those boulders by the lake, and manages to split them into pieces with a single incantation.

They make him feel powerful, yes, but so do many Light spells. In a way, he feels disappointed. There's no sense of unease, of guilt. He'd pictured himself battling temptation, perhaps, or overcoming great personal nausea to perfect a Dark spell for the greater good.

Crumbling a boulder into dust is anticlimactic, though satisfying. The magic feels exactly the same as Light magic; his stomach feels perfectly fine.

Perhaps to test himself he needs to attempt the spells that use blood or sacrifice or death. Those are more likely to test the nettle of an average wizard, and Percy is certainly not average.

***

Percy has always felt a bit disappointed that the Hogwarts term runs from September through early June. September is his favourite month in the castle; he enjoys the way the sun throws long, golden beams on the white castle stones, and the rustling of the dry leaves underfoot as he walks to Herbology, and the way his face feels cold and crisp after a long walk, though the rest of his body remains comfortably warm in his Weasley sweaters.

However, he only has a month of fall before October arrives, bringing with it far more bare branches and rainy nights than he would like. This particular October is decidedly wet and unpleasant, restricting his customary walks after supper, and corralling all of the students into the common spaces of the castle. Percy has improved his ability to live around so many

teenagers, but even he cannot bear the loud bursts of noise and chaos for prolonged periods. As a result, he finds himself more often than not with Myrtle, in the relative peace of her bathroom. He throws himself back into his painting with some passion whenever he has free time, squashing the whisper of guilt in his mind that he is working on something so unproductive by reminding himself that he must have at least one acceptable ambition or goal, and portraiture could be...helpful. He struggles for several weeks with a large rendering of Myrtle, struggling to capture her insubstantial form but substantial personality.

When he's finished, he incants the animation spell. It does not create *true* animation, merely sending her form zooming down a pipe at random intervals, only to pop out of the sink a few seconds later. However, Myrtle is ecstatic, and she calls many of the ghosts to come through her bathroom and see it. They hang it outside her bathroom, unsigned.

Even Hagrid comes, one drizzly afternoon toward the end of October. He stares at it for a very long time.

"I jus' wanted to apologise," he says gruffly when Myrtle and Percy catch him at it. "If I weren't raising Aragog, maybe they'd have found the fellow who killed you."

Myrtle is feeling cheerful and so this does not cause her to burst into tears. "Oh, it's not your fault," she says magnanimously. "Anyway, Percy and I have quite decided it was that nasty Tom Riddle. We've no proof, but *you* remember him, all cold and sneering."

Hagrid snorts. "Ye know, he applied for a job at Hogwarts once, he did. Defence Against the Dark Arts professor."

"He *did*?" Percy asks, suddenly alert.

Hagrid nods solemnly. "I prob'ly shouldn't have told you that, but it's not like anyone remembers Tom Riddle anymore. I wonder what happened to him after he left Britain. Slunk away after the Headmaster told him he had higher standards for a professor!"

Tom Riddle tried to apply for a job at Hogwarts? "Was this recently?" Percy asks delicately.

Hagrid shakes his head, sending some type of unidentifiable dust flying. Percy wrinkles his nose but leans in to listen. "Must ha' been ten years after he graduated," he says thoughtfully. "I remember because the old groundskeeper passed and I built m' hut."

Very interesting. Hagrid is reluctant to say more, perhaps realising this is not common knowledge. Not wanting him to go back to Dumbledore with tales of a student interested in the fate of Tom Riddle, Percy does not press.

But later, in the privacy of his bed, he muses over this new revelation. He had strategically deprioritised his research into Tom Riddle's life, replacing it with his duelling practice, Potions, Occlumency, and Dark magic. Now, at the very least, he could add another tick to the timeline of Riddle's life that Percy keeps in his head.

Why would he come back to beg Dumbledore— *Dumbledore* —for a position at Hogwarts? Percy imagines himself swallowing his pride to ask Dumbledore for anything and shudders.

Not a chance Riddle wanted to become a professor at Hogwarts badly enough to risk that sort of humiliation.

(When was the curse on the position placed? Could Riddle have been the one to curse it? How does one even *curse* a position? There had to be something physical to which someone could apply a curse; a registrar, a contract, some sort of entity).

No, there must have been something else Tom wanted, something he wanted badly enough to interact with Dumbledore. A secret out of his head, perhaps? Though, Tom must have known Dumbledore's mind was protected with Occlumency. Something at Hogwarts? A trip to the Chamber? One of the Founder's Objects? A rare book out of the library?

Percy shakes his head and turns over in his bed. Not a book, or a secret. Nothing that would be easy to get. By now, Percy knows of at least seven ways to enter secretly into Hogwarts, and Tom would have known more. It must be something that he thought would require time to obtain, perhaps an entire school year.

But what?

***

November 1990

Percy has stopped attending Quidditch games, now that Charlie has graduated, but he makes an exception for the first Gryffindor game of the season. Fred and George, newly christened Beaters, zoom around in tandem, wreaking havoc in the air.

All of his yearmates are there. Oliver has been named Quidditch captain, an unprecedented honour for a fourth year player. Percy watches him watch his team, the concentration on his face clear even from a distance. Oliver has never warmed up to Percy; their rocky start exacerbated by Percy's lingering feelings of discomfort. Nevertheless, Percy is happy to see him clearly in his element.

"Nice to see you display some House spirit," says Alexander, voice edging between teasing and pointed.

Percy throws him an assessing glance. More teasing than pointed, he decides, and throws back an airy, "Shall we measure House spirit in points earned or Quidditch games attended?"

Alexander grins as their yearmates titter. The other boy is notorious among professors and classmates alike for his wild, careening spells that tend to lose an average of fifteen House points per lesson.

"If we are optimising for both, I think I am the clear winner," Henry says loftily from Percy's side.

Mariana shoots him a sly glance and nudges him with her shoulder. “Are you sure about that?” Percy looks down to hide a smile. He was never close to them in the previous timeline, but he remembers their quiet, steady romance of their seventh year. He lost track of them after graduation, so he cannot be sure whether it lasted, but the two are suited for each other.

Fourth year means that his classmates are fourteen, an age of pimples and hormones and despicable acts. Percy can feel the changes in his own body, even as he ignores them in his mind. His body reacts to things his mind would never desire—Mariana’s floral perfume, the sixth year that he debates Charms theory with during Painting Club, even the way Henry smiles, quick and mysterious—and Percy has seriously debated looking up spells to stop the effect. He does not need puberty twice, and he certainly does not need to feel any sort of desire for *children*.

*

“We begin,” Professor McGonagall says ceremoniously, “with our own mind.”

Percy has the feeling she has said this before. It does not lessen the thrill he feels, sitting in his professor’s office, waiting to learn how to become an Animagus. In this timeline he has spent years acquiring knowledge he never thought to acquire before, from dark magic to transfiguration, even to painting. He could admit now he’d been something of a swot in his previous life, but he had never pursued knowledge quite like this.

Professor McGonagall continues after a meaningful pause. “*We* provide everything for the Animagus transfiguration. We are the anchor; we are the force. We are the magic; we are the incantation; we are the wand. The form is our form, the power is our own.”

Her Scottish burr lengthens with the cadence of her words, so unlike how she normally speaks in lessons. Percy feels the shiver that he feels doing Dark magic, greeting the summer with his great-aunt, finally understanding what causes a spell to work. It is a recognition of magic as something wild and powerful and heady, as his heritage and his birthright.

“Not everyone can become an Animagus,” his professor continues, her voice losing some of its grandeur. “One cannot transform if one does not have a form to transform *to*. Many a student wished for a lion and refused to accept they may be a bird.”

“Self knowledge,” Percy says, echoing her words from the previous year. He sits a little straighter. “I have prepared a list of possible forms—”

Professor McGonagall laughs sharply, but not unkindly. “Do not enter this stage of the process with expectations,” she cautions. “A form must come to you.”

Percy frowns. “Should I make a list instead of my most prominent traits?”

She shakes her head and hands him a slim, bound volume. He looks down: *A Primer on Meditation and the Form*. “Complete these exercises in order and as scheduled. In the meantime, please produce an essay explaining the theory behind why meditation would help you find your form.”

“It’s like Occlumency,” he says, without thinking. “Meditation with magic can concretise our thoughts. Souls have—tenor.”

Professor McGonagall stares at him with narrowed eyes. “I will, once again, pretend I did not hear that you have kept up your studies into Occlumency. Not many fourth years would study a restricted art,” she says evenly.

“Not many are trying to be an Animagus, either,” he offers up, hoping as always his precociousness will distract from the suspicion he may be a time traveller, or a Dark Wizard.

After a tense silence she drops her gaze and Percy breathes an internal sigh of relief. “Quite. The essay should be easy for you, I imagine. Please complete it by our next session.”

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The book is not merely meditation, he finds. They include spells and potions, whereas his Occlumency exercises are primarily mental. The trances these produce are substantial and often jarring.

Later that week, Percy comes out of a state to find both Myrtle and the Fat Friar watching him with some curiosity. He starts. Seconds ago, he had been examining his life with absent curiosity, emotions dulled by a dilution of rue, dandelion heart, and an emulsion of lizards' bloods, realising how he prefers to wait in the shadows instead of making a stand. It takes him a second to refocus on the ghosts, ephemeral in the late light.

"Sir," Percy says automatically. It's the safest form of address for ghosts, particularly those who have been dead for a while.

The Fat Friar sweeps his hat off theatrically and doffs it. "Please, call me Anthony," he says. His voice is both a boom and a whisper. Percy cannot help but throw a startled glance at Myrtle, who smiles at him conspiratorially.

"He couldn't resist meeting you," she reveals. "He's quite interested in the Map."

Percy fumbles for it. He’s nearly done with his own version, but he does not want to reveal that to the ghost. "I solemnly swear I am up to no good," he says, a bit embarrassed by the childish password.

The Fat Friar floats by for a better look. After so many afternoons spent with Myrtle, Percy barely notices the chill of his form. "Ah, truly fascinating," the Friar says, his voice once

again surprising Percy with its dual effect. "We are on the Map, as Myrtle said. Tell me, boy, are paintings?"

"No, sir," Percy says politely. “What do you make of that?” He and Myrtle had never agreed on whether the ghosts' presence on the Map indicated whether they had souls. Percy believed it was a case of residual magic recognised by the register, but if that were the case, surely portraits would appear?

The Fat Friar makes a thoughtful noise. "Perhaps the Map does track souls, then, and not magic."

"But ghosts—"

"But nothing," Myrtle interrupts breathlessly. "It could be possible, Percy."

"Or portraits do not have the magic that resonates with the registry," Percy argues. "Ghosts don't have *souls*, Myrtle. Otherwise what do we give up when we die?"

“Part of us,” the Fat Friar interjects. “I’ve often thought that souls are more flexible than we think,” he says thoughtfully. “Consider an Animagus: consider a soul changing form or shape or concealing an animal.”

“Consider the Fidelius,” Percy adds, despite himself. “A soul adapting to hide a secret within it.”

The Fat Friar smiles a ghostly smile. “Exactly,” he says. “Souls can meld or change. I believe at death, the soul *splits*.” Percy freezes and hopes it does not show. “Consider a Dementor: nobody Kissed by a Dementor can become a ghost, you know. I think a Dementor steals the entire soul. I would be interested to see if a Soul Sucked person appears on this map."

“What about paintings?” Myrtle says eagerly.

The Fat Friar makes a thoughtful noise. “Portraits, I think, do not have souls. They are animated, but they are never *alive*. Not like ghosts, who were once people.”

Percy hopes his voice is casual as he asks, “What do you mean, the soul splits at death?”

“I believe it fractures, just for a second,” the Fat Friar answers readily. “At the moment of death, there is a single instance where it feels as though you are being pulled in two directions.”

Myrtle nods in breathless agreement. “And you have one second, just a single second, to decide to stay or go.”

“It is a second that seems to last forever,” the Friar murmurs, clearly remembering even after all these years. “And yet it passes before you know it.”

“And you both decided to stay,” Percy completes, feeling very small. He has never heard of this before, never wondered too deeply why some become a ghost and some do not. He does not know of many new ghosts, even during the war. Why do so few people decide to stay?

The question must appear on his face, for both Myrtle and the Friar wear the exact same pitying smile. “You will see, one day,” the Friar says. “It is not an easy decision. It is not one taken lightly. But nonetheless, it is a decision that we have, and I believe that decision is whether to anchor part of the soul to this world or whether to move on.”

“Not the whole soul?”

The Friar shakes his head. “No,” he says, and to Percy’s surprise Myrtle nods in agreement. “You will understand, if you are to become a ghost. We do not have our whole souls. That we can feel. But I believe we have *something*, and I think that Map recognizes it, too.”

Percy looks down at the Map, but he barely sees it. He has so many questions, and he wishes suddenly that the Dark Lord had left a record, a diary not enchanted but full of his experience. To split a soul prematurely; no wonder the ritual is so Dark, so secret. If the Friar is right, creating a Horcrux takes a natural process and makes it unnatural, twists it and corrupts it. At the moment of death, therefore, the soul is already split. Maybe Riddle had not been given a choice at all, then, but was forced to stay, his ghostly essence trapped instead in a Horcrux.

He begins to feel a chill as he recalls the short paragraph from *Evile Most Fowle*. The book lacked detail, but it aligns with what the Friar is saying: at the moment of death, the soul is thought to split. One can use a spell to transform that force and split one’s own soul instead.

With his study of magic, Percy can imagine what the spell must do. It must use that split as a transformative force, both to split one’s own soul and to force a physical form onto the soul. Percy can almost guess at the particulars of the spell, which leaves him feeling sick.

The Dark Lord’s shade is coming to Hogwarts, and Percy suddenly has a nasty idea of what that truly means.

***

December 1990

Given that Christmas will lack both Bill and Charlie, and that within the new year the Dark Lord will return to Hogwarts, Percy elects not to go home to the Burrow for the holidays. His mother writes him a terse letter when he informs her of his decision to study for his exams instead, but she does not send a Howler, so he figures she cannot care unduly whether her middle child is home or not. Likely she will spend the time alternating between fussing over Ron, the next to leave the Burrow, and stewing over Bill and Charlie’s absence.

The castle is cold and empty. He enjoys it. There is something about walking through the halls of the castle, the air cold and crisp without hundreds of students and their warming charms drifting in and out of classrooms. Fred and George went home, and so Gryffindor Tower is essentially empty. On the first night he luxuriates in an armchair near the fire. Percy

spends very little time in the Common Room for obvious reasons, but when it is empty, it is downright comfortable.

That evening, he opens the first of the books that Andromeda had given him over the summer and begins to read about the Black family. They too tell the same story: a noble and pure family fallen from grace, its heirs scattered to the winds, its ranks thinned by insubordination and infighting and death. Of the main Black line, only Sirius and Regulus remain, one imprisoned and one presumed dead.

He writes to Madam Tonks and asks her about Regulus. Her response is informative:

He died during the war, toward the end, I believe. He was a Death Eater, and Narcissa wrote to me to say that he had angered the Dark Lord. Many did; few survived his ranks save the wealthy and polished or the subservient. Regulus was always too impetuous to have survived for long serving the Dark Lord. The problem with filling your army with the scions of noble families is that those scions are taught they rule the entire world. They are not used to being ruled.

He had no funeral. Sirius must have been deep undercover for the Dark Lord at the time and likely felt it unsafe to show his grief for a brother he allegedly hated. (Perhaps he did hate his brother; believing in the same madman does not a family unite). One wonders if Regulus knew of Sirius' true allegiance; it is likely not.

Draco, son of Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy, and Nymphadora are the last heirs to the Black line, and their claim is only through my father's blood. I believe you and your brothers are next after they, though I may be forgetting some other cousins. We are all related, even if we pretend we are not when it comes time to forge allegiances, make enemies, or broker marriages.

His letter from Tonks, the younger, is much longer. They write occasionally, and this last missive is full of stories of her time in Auror training. Percy finds himself actually laughing out loud and responds the same night, filling it with Potions advice and tales from past Weasley Christmases.

He wonders why he never knew the Tonks family in the previous timeline, though he does know that Ron and Ginny were at least familiar with Nymphadora. Learning she had married his old professor had been quite a shock.

They would have been a useful family to cultivate, or at the very least a nice family to befriend. Percy feels another rush of resentment toward his family. He does not understand their tendency to turn inward, their hesitancy to take their place in the Wizarding World. He and Draco Malfoy are both directly descended from Phineas Nigellus, famous Headmaster of Hogwarts. That meant something, or could mean something, if only they *tried!*

***

Many of the professors choose to stay as well. He supposes in theory Hogwarts professors could have families. The spouse must live in the castle as well, or the professor must be willing to spend all their free time Flooing to their home. Sprout goes somewhere, and so presumably has somewhere to go, but Snape, Flitwick, and McGonagall are all present at most meals.

On the fourth night of the break, Percy even sees McGonagall and Snape, battling at chess. He cannot help but linger, though the other students staying for break—fourteen in all—have long since cleared the Great Hall. With the candles flickering low, and the tree looming in the corner, and snow falling in the enchanted ceiling, the night is, dare he say, *cozy,* and his two professors seem almost cheerful. He could return to the Common Room, but though it is comfortable, he is uncomfortably aware that he is the only Gryffindor student staying for the holidays, and every noise seems amplified.

They are seated at the Ravenclaw table, near the staff table. Percy hesitates over which table to sit at, and then sheepishly takes a seat at the same table, further down. He takes out his book of Animagus meditation exercises and his notebook so it seems less obvious that he is watching their game.

“Severus, really,” says McGonagall, laughing, as Snape surveys the board, motionless. “It shall be the new year before you make your move.”

“Patience, Minerva,” Snape says without changing his expression. “I, unlike you, shan’t resort to hasty measures.”

McGonagall snorts incredulously and turns her head to grin at Percy. “Slytherins,” she says conspiratorially, and Percy finds himself grinning back before he can stop himself.

Snape finally makes his move, without ceremony, and McGonagall immediately narrows her eyes at it thoughtfully. Thus free to move, Snape gives Percy a sideways glance, noting his reading materials. “Any news, Weasley, on your form?”

Percy frowns and flips the book open to his bookmark. “Mammal, I think,” he says, thinking of the last exercise with some distaste. One of the spells had him experience sensations as if he were a type of animal—flying, swimming, climbing. He’d absolutely hated every second of the flying, the chaotic and unpredictable turmoil of the winds, so he thinks he can safely rule out anything with wings.

“Excellent progress, I see,” Snape says sarcastically.

“Don’t rush him, Severus,” scolds McGonagall absently. “You know how these things take time."

Time, time, time. Percy smiles thinly as Snape says something cutting back, and McGonagall laughs again. He does not have enough time. He has too much time.

Looking at Snape and McGonagall now, during a peace they believe will never end, Percy is struck by how little time they have left. Fred will be dead in eight years if Percy does not find a way to save him. Did Snape know, all this time, that the Dark Lord would return? He is so

incredibly young; in this timeline, Percy can appreciate that Snape is barely thirty, that he is not anything close to the all-knowing adult that his students think him to be. Even McGonagall, for all that she is mysteriously ancient, looks younger and happier now than she will for the rest of her life.

His good mood gone, he packs up his things and leaves abruptly, barely bothering to say goodbye. These things take time, but he has none of it yet, and he must *act* before he runs out of it entirely.

***

January 1991

On the first day of the new year, Percy tries his first *real* Dark Ritual. He is fairly certain by now that the Horcrux ritual is indeed a ritual, rather than a spell, which means that he ought to turn his attention away from merely spellcraft. Spells are often a matter of intent, as well as magical strength and wand-form. As wizards grow in ability, the need to rely on precise, exaggerated wand gestures fades, until a strong wizard could cast even a *Stupefy* with a sharp jab of his wand. Rituals, on the other hand, hold no such distinction. They must be carefully composed, precisely followed, and deliberately obeyed.

Rituals also tend to involve both Arithmancy and Ancient Runes. Both classes briefly cover their use in Dark Arts but do not delve into too much detail. Light Rituals exist as well, of course; seventh year students taking both Arithmancy and Ancient Runes are given the opportunity to create their own graduation ritual for extra distinction on the NEWTs. Percy had, in his first timeline, created a ritual for stress-relief, which had made Professor Vector laugh out loud. He wonders whether she ever used it.

This time, he does not dare to create his own, but rather finds a rather complex Dark ritual of protection over his things. If somebody were to casually brush by or pick up something of his, it will have no effect, but if someone with ill-intent were to try and take or access one of his possessions, the ritual would activate and burn their fingers.

The actual consequence—burnt fingers—is fairly benign and, he hopes, something he could pass off as a consequence of a much Lighter spell. What makes this ritual complex is that it forcefully accesses the person's *intent,* judges their will to be harmful, and then demands a price.

He spreads all of his things onto the floor, taking advantage of the empty dormitory, and sets up a small cauldron over an everlasting flame. This particular ritual first uses a potion to demarcate which possessions are protected; the potion is relatively simple, though required some ingredients that were more expensive than Percy would like to admit, and he pours the

clear blue liquid carefully over each item, chanting continuously under his breath. The items glow and then the brew disappears, seeping into each.

Next, he returns the cauldron to the flame. There is precisely three-sevenths of a litre of the brew left, and he adds five drops of blood to it, one drop from each finger on his left hand. The brew hisses and coils and he feels a hot breath of air gust over the back of his neck. Then abruptly the brew settles; his blood has been accepted, and the brew thickens to a dark red paste.

Next comes the runes. Percy carefully dips his right index finger into the sludge and paints the runes carefully on each item. Here too is where his Arithmancy comes into question; there are many runes, all of which contain their own power, but where runes become truly incredible is when arranged in mathematically correct permutations. Order matters, and so Percy consults his parchment regularly. He'd changed the series of runes from the book he was following so that the consequence *was* burned fingers, rather than the thief's hand melting off completely.

Finally, he gathers his magic and feels it roiling over his skin, gathering in little sparks in his palms, until he can see visibly the evidence that he is a strong wizard. To *visualise* one's magic like so is incredibly difficult, and Percy feels a fierce, exultant pride in himself that he is so easily able to call his magic to his command.

He breathes out the final incantation and spreads his palms. His magic leaps obediently out of his hands and blazes over each item. As the red-gold sparks of his magic meet each rune, the rune flashes brightly and then disappears.

Percy laughs fiercely, wildly, at the glee that fills him at the sight, the knowledge that *he* is powerful, that *he* is skilled, that *he* can demand any price from his enemies and they will have to obey.

Then he looks up and stifles a scream because Severus Snape is implausibly in his dormitory door, looking at him with a single raised eyebrow, waiting for him to finish.

"Professor—" Percy gasps out, but Snape merely says, *"Detention,* tomorrow, six o'clock," and walks away.

Well, fuck.

***

"A golden boy, fallen from grace," Snape says with undisguised glee, surveying the boy in front of him.

Percy meets his gaze without amusement and does not respond. He spent the entire day fretting about what to do; about how Snape detected his magic, about how he can explain

himself, about whether he will have to tell his parents. It is so *frustrating* to be observed, to be contained, when he is doing nothing save what he ought to be doing. His actions may save the world, and Snape has no right to stop him.

"*Dark Magic*," Snape continues. "How predictable, Mr. Weasley. If you are to act out, at the very least, choose something with a bit more originality."

Percy tenses in irritation but still does not respond. He will not play this game. He does not regret what he has done.

"I see it every year: some smart young idiot longs for glory, for recognition. Dark Magic, he realises, relies on *emotion*. He is so tired of being ignored, so tired of being overlooked. He has emotions aplenty. Am I right so far, Mr. Weasley?"

He's not wrong, which is all the more infuriating. "Whatever you say, Professor," Percy finally responds.

Snape smiles thinly. "Alas, I am right," he says. "For once, I was hoping for something new, but instead I have to supervise yet another dunderhead whose wand was too big for his holster. The gods punish me, truly."

There is a beat of silence.

"For your detention, you'll be explaining to me why you explored the Dark Arts."

Percy jerks his head up in confusion. Snape raises a mocking eyebrow and indicates a pile of dirty cauldrons near the front of the room. "And scrubbing cauldrons, of course."

Of course.

Percy takes a bristle brush and a small jar of cleaning solution and sits at the front table, levitating the first cauldron toward him. At least he is proficient in cauldron repair. He nonverbally casts a spell he learned during his stint in the Ministry, used to clean the cauldrons before they were catalogued.

"Nonverbal spells, too," Snape comments idly. He is sitting behind his desk, watching Percy with dark eyes. "What an accomplishment for one so young. How *precocious*."

Percy grits his teeth against the insult and scrubs harder. Snape is like this in his lessons, too: endlessly mocking, endlessly condescending. He does not shout at Percy like he does to Penelope nor does he insult him like he does Harry. And yet, his amused mockery is so much *worse* somehow.

"Now, Mr. Weasley. The other part of the detention. Why is it that you decided to practise Dark Magic, and in a way so blindingly obvious that I discovered you after a few weeks?"

"How *did* you discover me, Professor?" Percy asks blandly.

Snape's lips twitch. The movement is slight, but Percy catches it. "The ritual you chose sent up quite a surge of magic," his professor responds. "Luckily for you, I do not think your

beloved Head of House noticed, but I remain…attuned to such disturbances in the magic of the castle. Make no mistake, Weasley: I have been watching you for some time. Now. Tell me. What is driving your little studies?"

"Curiosity," Percy answers, focusing on the cauldron. He cannot let up that he has been practising Dark Magic for over a year now.

"Do you think me dim, Mr. Weasley?"

"No, sir."

"Do you think me easily fooled?"

"No, sir."

Snape bangs his hand on the desk and hisses, "*Then explain to me, right now, why you practiced the Dark Arts."*

"I was curious!" Percy exclaims, looking up involuntarily. "I wanted to see if there was something there for me."

"And did you find what you sought?"

Percy actually thinks about this, though undoubtedly Snape had meant it merely to ridicule him. He had sought and found knowledge, that was for certain. But had he been seeking something else? *Power*, something whispers from inside of him. *Respect*. That is ridiculous, though. He seeks only knowledge.

Snape leans back in his chair again when Percy does not answer. "Typical arrogance," he sneers. "You put yourself at risk, and for nothing." Snape raises his eyes slowly to meet Percy's. "The Dark Arts are cruel," he says deliberately. "They are beautiful—but they are cruel."

"You've practised them."

"For a lifetime," Snape says softly. "And they have yielded no reward which I sought when I was young and foolish."

"That's why you supervise these detentions, then?" Percy says, forgetting, for a second, that he is speaking to a professor. He eyes Snape, man to man, war-torn adult to war-torn adult. "To make sure others don't follow the same path."

"No," Snape says, and his lips are hard. "To know my enemies."

There is a long silence after that.

Percy returns to scrubbing, but the thought grows, persistent, in his mind. He knows Snape's story; knows Snape is loyal to Dumbledore even when he curses him off the Astronomy tower. He knows that Snape tries to protect Hogwarts after the Ministry's fall, and that the Dark Lord kills him before the end, recognizing his treachery. Harry told his story in speech

after speech, insisting the man was protecting him all along, that his nasty ire was merely a shield to protect his true intentions.

Why *shouldn't* he tell Snape now? Percy's been holding the thought in his pocket, knowing he may one day have to come clean to Snape to save his own skin. Why not preempt that situation when they still have three years together at Hogwarts?

Snape has a lifetime of lying to not one but two masters; he has the skills that Percy needs; he has the discretion. Percy may be finally fourteen but he can't even practice Dark Magic without being outed by his professor. How will he expect to do what he needs to do—sneak out, destroy Horcruxes, perhaps enchant Dark rituals—without an ally?

"What are you thinking, boy?"

But an ally of what sort? Percy is a Gryffindor, but he is not foolish. He does not leap before he looks. He seeks *knowledge*.

"Do you think Dark Magic is inherently evil?" He asks instead of confessing everything.

Snape lifts a careful eyebrow. "Yes," he says, watching for the surprise on Percy's face, who had been expecting something along the lines of *shades of grey*. "Dark spells are a corrupting force. They sully the very centre of your magic and transform that magic into something evil. Nobody is exempt. Dark Magic is classified as such because it affects your very self, your very source of magic, and turns it cruel, not because of what the spells *do*."

Yes, Percy thinks, excited despite himself. *Yes*. That's what he's begun to suspect: Dark Magic has a transformative force of its own. "That's why a cutting curse is not Dark Magic, even though it can kill."

"Yes," Snape says softly, almost dreamily. "To cast an Unforgivable is to fray your soul, Mr. Weasley. That damage cannot be undone."

He gulps and thinks about some of the spells he attempted, the addicting feeling of dark magic gathering under his skin, waiting to be used. He can't help but picture tiny bits of his soul tearing off like fluff from a dandelion fluttering in the wind, leaving a frail green stem.

Snape seems to know what he is thinking. "It takes many years for a Dark soul to rip," he whispers. "But only a second for it to tear."

"I didn't know," Percy gasps, feeling his throat tighten, feeling a desperate urge to check if his soul is whole—

"What have I told you for two years," Snape snaps, and suddenly the lurking danger in the room is banished and replaced by Snape's normal classroom presence. "*Ignorance is no excuse for failure*."

"Yes, sir," Percy says numbly. What else has he failed at due to his ignorance? Suddenly the entire impossible task looms in front of him and Percy wants to laugh at his arrogance. How had he believed that he could send himself twisting back into the past and defeat the most

evil Dark Lord that had ever existed? Dark Magic may have torn his soul, but Tom Riddle ripped his apart first. How could a man do that to himself? How could Percy even hope to defeat him?

Snape settles back in his seat. “Keep scrubbing. Luckily, you practiced Dark Magic with the type of incompetence I would expect from a Weasley attempting to play Dark, so I doubt your insipid little soul has come to much harm.”

Percy is too rattled to respond.

***

He stops practising Dark Magic, for now, but he does not stop reading about it.

The theory still enchants him. It is like nothing else that he’s ever read before. He returns to Hogsmeade during the next trip and purchases several books on the history of Dark Arts. Those are particularly fascinating. It is as Snape said: the magic has a life of its own. At several points, it seems as though the spells influence the wielder, who in turn develops more spells in a grotesque, twisted dance.

(And all the while, an idea he dares not verbalise grows stronger in his mind—)

***

The Gryffindor table is *loud*.

Percy much prefers the quiet of the Ravenclaw table, but Landon had not been free for supper tonight, and so sup with the Gryffindors he must. To be fair, Ravenclaws are likely to break into impassioned debate at breakfast or even lunch, but dinner tends to be a quieter affair, house members more likely to be starting their homework or decompressing after a difficult day of classes. Gryffindors, it seems, spend the entire day bottling up their energy only to release it in a wild gust as dusk falls across the Great Hall.

Percy, however, perseveres. He sits with Fred and George and listens to them recount the day, an exhausting barrage of words that he only barely follows. Oliver, pimply and freckly, interrupts Fred and George’s reenactment of their Charms lesson. “Eat quicker,” he begs, already dressed in his Quidditch gear. Percy holds in a snort. Oliver had never become *less* mad about Quidditch, but he’d learned to stop showing up for meals fully suited.

“But practice isn’t until nine,” Fred objects. Of all the Weasleys, except for maybe Ron, Fred has the largest appetite. In both timelines, Fred discovers the kitchens before the end of the first month.

"We don't have the pitch til nine," corrects Oliver. "But we can review our plays at any time."

"Eating well is important," Percy interjects, trying to be helpful. "You oughtn't rush them, Oliver."

But Fred only gives him a baleful look and sets down his fork, standing up. "Like you know anything about Quidditch," he scoffs.

Oliver looks between Percy and Fred, but his eagerness to begin practice clearly wins out over whatever apprehension he may have about the clear tension between the brothers. George gives Percy an apologetic look and follows Fred and Oliver out, leaving Percy with Lee Jordan.

"They're a bit upset you didn't go home for Christmas you know," Lee says.

Percy has never exchanged more than a few words with Lee, and doesn't know what to say in response to this.

Lee shrugs and gathers up his things as well. "It was nice of you to sit with us, though."

Left alone, Percy spears his chicken moodily. He had a productive break, despite his run-in with Snape. He'll have plenty of Christmases to spend with his family if he can actually succeed at his task.

***

February 1990

After the Dark Magic Incident, as Percy has taken to calling it in his mind, Snape is watchful.

And yet, strangely, Percy feels more comfortable around him. Percy feels awkward and resentful toward Flitwick, whose attention feels like the prickling dry heat of a very hot day. Around Snape, however, he feels strangely loose.

In a way, he feels *seen*. He feels, in a manner he cannot entirely verbalise, *protected*. Snape will not let him give his soul to the Dark Arts, if only because Snape has a vested personal interest in minimising the number of Dark wizards in Britain. The professor does not care for Percy personally, but he will not interfere in Percy’s activities, as long as they do not threaten Snape or his goals.

And so Percy actually relaxes in his lessons, for the first time in either timeline. Nobody that knows Percy would term him relaxed, and yet during his weekly Potions tutorials, he does just that.

Relaxing, he finds, helps him.

In a way, Potions is like any other magic. Magic has rules and boundaries and logical structures. Ingredients can resonate; magic can transform. He begins improving, to both his and Snape's surprise.

"You are not like the rest of your family," Snape comments idly during one such lesson.

Percy does not remove his attention from the potion at hand. Snape enjoys startling him, trying to distract him with personal comments or unrelated questions. The trick, Percy's found, is to listen only absently and continue brewing. Snape does not need a respondent to carry on a full conversation.

"Your older brothers, while somewhat intelligent, were very focused on one goal," Snape continues musing. "Why William believes he can be a curse breaker when he has hardly the patience or skill to sense magic is beyond me, but Charles is more suited to dragon taming."

It surprises Percy that Snape has kept tabs on the Weasley family, but he supposes professors do see more than students tend to give them credit for, and the Wizarding World *is* rather small. Percy can name what nearly all of his yearmates did immediately out of Hogwarts, though he began losing track of them once the war started.

"Your younger brothers do not merit any sort of discussion," Snape says, derision clear in his voice. Percy bends over his cauldron to prevent his lips from twitching. Fred and George seem to delight in causing trouble in Potions. "And then we come to you. This Weasley studies Dark Magic and talks to ghosts. This Weasley has no friends but no clear ambition. Why take all these lessons, Mr. Weasley?"

"I like to learn," Percy says when it becomes clear Snape is expecting a response. He gives a shrug. "Perhaps I should have been a Ravenclaw."

"Spare me your adolescent attempts at subtlety," Snape says tiredly. Again, Percy must hide his amusement. "What is your research focus, your interest? What ties together your lessons? I know you have ambition, Mr. Weasley, or you would not have been able to fuel some of those Dark spells."

Percy does not entirely agree with that line of argument but he chooses not to pursue his objections. Instead, he finds himself telling a bit of the truth. "I am interested in souls," he admits. "Souls seem to drive so much of the magic that we do and yet there is not much information on them."

"Souls," Snape repeats with some derision.

Percy bristles. "Souls are too often ignored in magic theory," he argues. "Issues of resonance, of affinity—what are they but issues of the soul? In the Animagus transformation, the soul acts as an anchor to yourself. Souls can hide secrets, they can be lost, they can split, they can tear."

Snape nods thoughtfully. "And Potions?"

Percy bites his lip before he says something he will regret.

Snape eyes him. "I will discover what you are aiming for," he says coolly. "Do not think you can fool me for long, Mr. Weasley."

***

Percy has begun to dread his Animagus meditations, for what he feels more than anything is shame. It reminds him of that year after Fred's death, now several years behind him, his wild grief healed by seeing Fred and George at the Gryffindor table every day.

The trances he falls into force him unapologetically to contemplate what a failure of a life he had led previously. Seven years of academic excellence, only to accept a relatively minor job at the Ministry. Head Boy of Hogwarts, only to graduate with few friends and a single ex-girlfriend. Promotion after promotion at the Ministry, conditional on his willingness to sever ties with his family and work for a deeply evil man.

All of his brothers had learned more than he did during their years at Hogwarts, however short. Bill marries Fleur, brilliant and beautiful in equal measure, and grows into a serious and intelligent man. Charlie seeks his dream with an intensity Percy can only begin to understand. Fred and George mature into their chaotic, restless energy and channel it into a profitable business and a range of products that saved dozens if not hundreds of lives during the war. Ron somehow outgrows his adolescent petulance to become a brave and clever young man with friendships legendary across Wizarding Britain. Even Ginny disgards her childhood whininess, becoming strong and charismatic and capable.

He alone wasted his life; he alone was friendless and ashamed of himself; he alone would have had few mourners at his funeral had he died during the Battle.

As much as he hates this realisation, he gathers up his remaining courage and forces himself to down the required potion night after night, seeking for self-knowledge despite the knowledge that it will only cause him pain.

Even the relative success of his new life rings hollow. He is approaching thirty; making a few friends among classmates half his age and excelling at a Hogwarts curriculum for the second time are hardly accolades to inscribe upon his gravestone.

He wonders if he can ask Professor McGonagall what to do when one knows oneself well but does not like what he sees.

***

Magic has balance. What can be created can be destroyed. Percy reminds himself of that central axiom as he stands naked in the wide tub of the Prefect's bathroom—the door carefully warded—and prepares to purify himself.

It was as Snape said: Dark Magic does leave a taint on the soul and magic, an intangible layer of oil and griminess that will spark with a second's provocation.

However, Percy needs to master Dark Magic if he is going to be able to defeat the Darkest Wizard of their time. Magic has balance. Therefore, he figures, he should pair his foray into Dark Magic with an exploration of Light Magic.

And thus, purification.

As he chants the requisite spells and bathes in a shockingly cold bath mixed with a variety of Potions, he thinks about the issue of balance. A Horcrux is a twisted facsimile of a soul. Logic dictates a Light spell or ritual be necessary to destroy it, but try as he might, he cannot find any Light destructive spells—only those intended to heal or purify. But can one heal a Horcrux? Percy has no interest in saving Tom Riddle, merely destroying him swiftly and efficiently. He does not want to unite the man's soul; he wants to set it aflame.

***

Landon and Henry—and several more of his peers, he supposes, bitterly reading a book during supper instead of participating in conversation—have begun to prepare for their debuts into society at fifteen, the age when many of them will be formally and publicly named as heir presumptive of their wealthy pureblood families.

Even if the Weasleys had not been *wealthy,* they could still have afforded to publicly claimed each child as was his due on his fifteenth birthday. It would have legitimised him, even a little, even if everyone would know not to expect a ball or a gala or a fancy gilded letter.

Percy does not know whether he would rather have to admit to his peers he would not be participating in their little pureblood rituals, or rather his peers assume preemptively that he would not be involved. To present himself from finding out, Percy begins to disappear at mealtimes, lingering over his assignments in the library or his conversations with Myrtle, and furtively going to the kitchens later on if he is hungry. Oddly enough, he is not very hungry these days, regardless.

***

March 1990

His Patronus refuses to materialise.

Myrtle watches him with some interest while he sweats his way through finding a happy memory. It should not be this difficult to *know himself*. He knows himself—both of his selves, the self that failed his family and the self that is trying to atone. He knows he is particular and methodical, capable and intelligent and a bit cold. He knows his best friend is a ghost of a teenage girl, and he has even come to terms with it. He knows his brothers all prefer someone else's company, his parents don't quite know what to do with him, and Aunt Muriel only tolerates his presence because she desperately longs for an heir.

He knows Flitwick does not trust him, and Snape thinks he is pathetic but amusing, and McGonagall is impressed with him, and Sprout barely thinks of him at all. He knows Oliver is jealous of him and Landon is tentatively his friend, and his brothers think he's a swot but decent.

He even has happy memories: Charlie by the river, confiding with him; McGonagall, fierce and proud during one of their debates; Mariana and Henry making space for him at the Three Broomsticks; Hogwarts, unblemished and new.

And yet his Patronus fizzles into white smoke.

***

He asks Snape about it, figuring the man will likely intersperse his ridicule with something that could be construed as helpful.

As predicted, his professor's lips twitch when he hears Percy's latest problem.

"A *Patronus*," he repeats mockingly. "How insipid. Going to defeat your enemies with the power of happiness, are you?"

Percy scowls. "An advanced bit of soul-based defensive magic," he corrects. "I am having trouble with the Animagus transformation, and I thought this may help."

"One's Animagus and one's Patronus rarely match," Snape says, settling into his chair. He interlocks his long fingers and watches Percy until he too takes a seat. "It is a common misconception, particularly for beginners, or those lacking a solid foundation in magical theory."

Percy nods impatiently. "The Patronus is *transient*," he explains to forestall the inevitable lecture. "It reflects one's current emotional state, one's image of oneself. The form is often tied to the memory—or more accurately, the impression of memories—that produces it. Strong emotional shocks may cause it to change."

“The prodigy can read. Fascinating; I had my doubts.”

“The Animagus, however, reflects a more permanent truth about the person,” Percy says, ignoring Snape. “Its form is a reflection of who you are on a fundamental level.”

Snape lifts a mocking eyebrow. “Trite,” he comments. “And so your inability to cast a Patronus is intrinsically separate from your inability to find your form. Both indicate your lack of magical aptitude and self-discipline, yes, but are rooted in different shortcomings.”

“Pray, tell, sir,” Percy says, voice flat.

“You cannot cast a Patronus because something is preventing your clarity of focus,” Snape says, leaning back in his chair. “It is as I say during our lessons: you are emotional and unable to centre yourself. Your activities lack a central, unifying theme. You do not know what you hope to accomplish, nor why you wish to accomplish it. One does not cast a Patronus to help him with his Animagus transformation but to stave away the type of despair that can consume one's soul entirely.”

This burns a little, deep inside Percy’s stomach. It’s true; he sometimes feels as though he is striking wildly, unable to organise his activities in a way that makes sense to him as a series of cohesive objectives. He wishes to destroy the Horcruxes to save his family, but he does not know how to find more about the Horcruxes, or how to destroy them, or whether studying Dark Magic is the wrong approach. He has wasted an absurd amount of time learning about magic when perhaps that time would have been better spent elsewhere.

"No knowledge is a waste," he says quietly but firmly, willing himself to believe it.

"Perhaps," Snape allows. "Perhaps not. There are many at Hogwarts, yourself included, who surround themselves with knowledge to little effect. Think, Weasley. What is your *focus?* "

To defeat the Dark Lord, he thinks, firmly.

(Was that an itch he felt or the featherlight twitch of a mind sliding over his?)

He purses his lips and thinks about it, immersing himself in his goal. What would it actually be like to defeat the Dark Lord? He sees himself triumphant, brandishing a wand; he sees his family, safe and whole; he sees Hogwarts unblemished, his classmates alive.

He sees his family surrounding him, grateful, loving.

Percy swallows against a lump in his throat and raises his eyes to meet his professor's. "And my Animagus form?"

Snape's lips twist derisively. "You lack an awareness of yourself," he says, easily and dismissively. "What are the code tenants of your being? What cannot be stripped away from you, despite torture or age? What do you feel so strongly that they make up your entire self?"

"I don't know," Percy whispers, feeling stress rise up in his throat.

Snape stands, a clear dismissal. "And so you shan’t proceed until you do."

***

Dear Nymphadora,

Did you have to think about your core tenants to successfully become an Animagus? I, if you can believe it, was foolish enough to bring it up with Professor Snape. Needless to say, he made it clear that he expected nothing more than a failure from me.

I am sure not everyone who finds their form has the type of self knowledge that Professor Snape believes is necessary. I have completed the entire book of meditations and the only certainty I have arrived at is that I am not a bird. I do not feel as though I am soaring; I feel grounded, tied to the earth. But at the same time, I feel as though I am on the outskirts of the forest. Does that make sense?

I asked Charlie what he thinks my central tenants are. No response yet. Perhaps the dragons are taking up all of his time.

Best,

Percy

*

Dear Percival,

Asking Snape...are you crazy? Either you have balls of steel, or you're tremendously stupid. Maybe both. As my mentor would say: CONSTANT VIGILANCE! You can't let your guard down around him.

Anyway, I think the answer to your question is both yes and no. I would not call them central tenants (bit pretentious), but I think I have a strong impression of who I am as a person. What makes me 'me'. I don't think it's a static thing though — I think you have the freedom to change as a person, I think it has more to do with what you value, and what you think you will carry with you even as you change. I value agility and flexibility (ironic as I am very clumsy, just ask my mother), which are traits associated with birds. I am a hunter; the type of bird that will spend hours wheeling in the air, looking for its prey. I don't need to catch the 'prey' too often, but I need to always be looking.

Those types of traits are not necessarily my "core tenants." I think they are more my core values, what I choose to take with me into the next stage of my life.

A bit philosophical, no? Given that I'm essentially a fully-fledged Auror, I think I can pretend to be wise.

Anyway, let me know what Charlie says. He hasn't written to me in ages. I hope he's all right.

Also, I heard you wrote to my mum. Not cool! she wants to know why I never took interest in those stupid books, why I don't want to know about my family. It's all "Percy is basically an heir to the Black family, he wants to know what he's the heir of, why don't you?" What about, because the Black family doesn't care about my mum or me or my dad?

Anyway. Time for more training. It's really kicking my butt.

xoxo,

Tonks

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April 1990

A ghost materialises in front of Percy one balmy spring day, startling him into leaping to his feet.

She is young and very beautiful. Her face is carved from mist like an old statue, and her eyes are piercing even in death. From her dress robes, she seems both wealthy and very old.

She hovers in front of him without speaking. Without quite knowing why, he sweeps into one of the low, respectful bows that Aunt Muriel's taught him.

There is no change in her expression, but she tilts her head back at him in acknowledgement.

"You seek my House's diadem," she says finally, and her voice is cold and formal.

Percy blinks rapidly, trying to acclimate quickly to the Grey Lady. "Yes," he says. "Well, no. I am not seeking it for myself; I am merely completing a research project."

"Do not lie to me," the Grey Lady intones sternly. Percy feels a bit of a flush starting on his ears. "Tell me the truth, or I shall ensure you will never find it."

"I wish to learn about the founding of Hogwarts," Percy tries, and the Grey Lady pins him under a glance so wise and terrible that he falters halfway through the sentence and cannot finish his thought.

"I do not know all," she says softly, coldly, as if ice is crystallising on the ends of her words. "But I have been watching you, and I know something more drives you. Do you wish to have

it for yourself?"

"My Lady?"

The Grey Lady hovers closer. "It will not bring you any knowledge you seek. You are best to forget it."

"I can't," Percy says honestly, meeting her gaze. “I wish to use it to protect my family.” He pauses, thinking of the story Nick told—family splintered, mother betrayed, daughter the betrayer—and then takes a guess. He knows how he would feel if it were his family heirloom, and he failed to protect it. "But I will destroy it, if you wish."

"It cannot be destroyed."

But to his ears, this sounds like a question. "Everything can be destroyed." He looks at her, meets her ghostly eyes, and tries to let his full sincerity bleed into his voice. "If you would like me to, I will destroy it for you, or return it to where it belongs. It will not haunt you any further."

There is a long, prolonged silence.

Percy imagines having to live in the twins’ joke shop after Fred's death, having to be in the Burrow and staring at the clock on the wall, having to know that somewhere out there something his family entrusted with him is mocking him, mocking his failure.

He'd want it destroyed.

"You cannot destroy it because He made it so it cannot be destroyed," the Grey Lady says finally, and Percy sucks in a fast breath. The Dark Lord had found it, used it, and protected it. Of course. Perhaps that is how he learned to make Horcruxes. Perhaps Percy can use it to learn to destroy them.

"What did He do?"

"You know of who I speak." It is not a question.

Percy nods and then decides to take another risk. "I think He is not yet gone," he says, very quietly. He doesn't know whether the Dark Lord would have spoken to the Grey Lady, but he can't imagine she would support a man who used her family treasure to circumvent death.

"You seek Him," she says, and her voice is full of a terrible sadness. Percy shivers, small bumps raised on the back of his neck. "You seek to destroy Him."

Percy meets her gaze solidly. He does not know how she found out, but one thing he does know by now is that it is difficult to hide anything from ghosts. "Yes," he says simply.

She evaluates him quietly. “I took it from my family,” she says finally, her voice quiet but firm. “I stole the diadem. I sought to make myself cleverer, more important than my mother. I ran away with it. My mother, they say, never admitted that the diadem was gone, but pretended that she had it still. She concealed her loss, my dreadful betrayal, even from the

other founders of Hogwarts. Then my mother fell ill—fatally ill. In spite of my perfidy, she was desperate to see me one more time. She sent a man who had long loved me, though I spurned his advances, to find me. She knew that he would not rest until he had done so."

Percy can understand this story, can see the layers of betrayal and sadness and loss. He too would have taken the diadem; he too would have stayed away out of guilt and anger and pride. He had no lover to speak of, but he could understand not returning for anything less than another's love.

The Grey Lady smiles without warmth. "Yes," she says, echoing his thoughts. "You are like me. I have watched you, Percival Weasley. For many months I have watched you search for a way to destroy Him. I have you seen you lose your way."

His ears flush but he does not deny this.

"He was like me too," she says, still hovering in front of him. "Or so I thought. He understood the way jealousy burns, how our family is our greatest assault, how we must make a name for ourselves that is greater from where we came."

Percy nods without realising it.

"But he never would have returned to his family," the Grey Lady continues. "I hid the diadem and refused the man who loved me. I did not want to return with him—but I would have returned." Her voice is suddenly desperate, almost pleading. "I would have returned, but he killed me for refusing him."

"You wished to return on your own." This too Percy can understand.

"He cared not for family, for love. He lied to me, but he cared only for himself."

Percy has to interject. "How do you know who I am?"

Her lips twitch and she suddenly looks more alive, more mischievous. "I am the daughter of Lady Ravenclaw," she says. "I am capable of leaps of logic. I know not why you seek to destroy Him, but I can tell that you do."

"He killed my brother," Percy says, the pain of it still present even after so many years. "He *will* kill my brother, in under ten years. He kills many. He destroys Hogwarts."

The Grey Lady looks satisfied, as if she finished solving a difficult puzzle. "One who travels through time," she completes. "Yes. You are here to right your wrongs."

"Will the diadem help me destroy him?"

Again, another silence. They stand there in the cold corridor, a ghost and a boy, both many years out of their own time, both nursing a hatred against the same man, both trapped in the obligation to atone for the wrongs they enacted against their family, both ashamed of what they achieved in the pursuit of pride.

“Yes,” the Grey Lady says. “Though not in the way you imagine. You must find it. It is here, in Hogwarts.”

“Where is it?” Percy asks eagerly, his heart beginning to thud, but his excitement is swiftly quelled by her stern look.

“I gave away my secrets once too rashly,” the ghost says, and her tone is so raw with sorrow that she sounds very nearly alive. “Twice, even. I will not make that mistake a third time. It is in the Room of Hidden Things, but I will say no more than that.”

“The what?” Percy has never heard of this room, even with his careful perusal of the Marauder's Map.

There is a ghost of a smirk on the Grey Lady’s face. “If you cannot find it, you are not worthy of it,” she says. “I place my faith in you, Percival Weasley. Do not squander it.”

She turns and floats away.

Percy watches her go and begins to smile.

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He thinks about his encounter with the Grey Lady constantly. It distracts him to the point where he stops answering questions during the lessons, content to turn her story over and over again in his head.

He does not imagine he’ll ever speak to her again. It’s a miracle she deigned to speak with him even once. He thinks of coming back as a ghost, rushing to Hogwarts. Did she right her own wrongs? Was she able to apologise to her mother before she passed away? The Grey Lady had said she’d hidden the diadem, wherever she was, and Tom had found it, finally returning it to its rightful place, if only to suit his own plans.

Percy thinks about whether he’d come back as a ghost if he’d been killed during the final battle. *No*, he thinks instinctively. He would not have believed anybody would have wanted him back. What would he have done, haunted Hogwarts for eternity and scolded first years for not properly tying their ties? His family would not have wanted to see him, not after he killed Fred.

The Grey Lady must have come back as a ghost because she wanted to be remembered. She wanted to say goodbye to her mother; she wanted to guard the diadem’s secret. Myrtle became a ghost to torment Olive at breakfast. Why did the Fat Friar? Why did Nearly Headless Nick?

Why didn’t Fred?

Would Fred not want to have returned as a ghost, to be with George? Percy can only imagine feeling as close to someone as Fred would have presumably felt to George. If he loved George so much, why wouldn't he come back? Why not Tonks, to raise her child? Why not Dumbledore, to guide Harry?

It would not have been a mercy to return, he thinks, and the thought makes him feel sick to his stomach. Choosing to be a ghost is fundamentally selfish; a desire to stay on, to linger, to force one's family to constantly face the realisation that but a pale imitation remains. The twisted irony is that once that family dies, the ghost is left alone for eternity.

As he thinks about it, mindlessly following his peers to Herbology, he has to admit there is a certain selfishness in what he's done himself. He came back: not as a ghost but as a previous version of himself, to right his wrongs, yes, but also to live in a world where Fred is alive and his family does not despise him and he has a second chance.

For the first time in many years, confronting that truth does not make his ears burn in embarrassment. It was selfish, yes, in the same way that it would have been selfish for Tonks to come back as a ghost to raise her infant son. But something being selfish does not mean it does not provide value. Percy did not know the child very well, but he can't imagine Teddy would have disliked the opportunity to speak to even a shade of his mum. George would have enjoyed Fred haunting his joke store, even if it would have been a bit sad, too.

Percy's choice had been selfish, yes—but that didn't mean that he couldn't use his new life to do good. He'd been lost, yes, unsure of how to regroup and target Tom—but that didn't mean that he hadn't been making progress toward his goals. He'd learned more magic than the entirety of his previous life; he'd learned about souls, about Dark Magic, about Horcruxes; he'd been trusted enough by the daughter of Rowena Ravenclaw to be the only person alive to be told where the diadem of knowledge lay.

He has a *purpose* in this life that sent him back, like the Grey Lady, like Myrtle, like Nick.

Nearly to the greenhouses, he stops suddenly in excitement, feeling that resolve swell inside his stomach. His classmates turn to him in some confusion, but he waves them off with an excuse about feeling ill. He makes it only to the pumpkin patch behind Hagrid's hut when he sinks to the ground and dives into his own head with a quietly murmured incantation. He'd been saving the Soul Seek spell for when he'd felt *ready*, and for the first time in quite a long time, he feels that sense of certainty he'd been lacking over the last year.

He has a purpose, and there's nothing else he needs to know about himself. Like a ghost, nothing else matters to the core tenets of his personality. He is here to kill the Dark Lord; all else is superfluous. He may be selfish sometimes, or distracted, or weak, or jealous—but he is also brave, and determined, and intelligent, and, he hopes, strong.

When he emerges from his trance, he knows what his form is.

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“A lynx,” says McGonagall, with barely any hesitation, studying the rough drawing Percy had done in his dorm, skipping Herbology for the first time in his school career to sprint back to his pad of parchment and charcoal. “Scotland’s lost animal, you know.”

“Sorry?”

“Lynxes were driven extinct a thousand years ago in Scotland,” the professor elaborates. “Did you bring the book on symbols?”

Percy starts and rummages in his bag. He hasn’t felt so young in ages, but the excitement of the spell and the promise of a form and his newfound absolution of guilt sends him reeling back into adolescence.

Student and professor pour over the book together. “A seer,” Percy reads out loud. “A keeper of secrets; a clairvoyant; one who unravels hidden truths.”

Despite himself, Percy blushes as McGonagall smiles warmly at him. “An auspicious form,” she says. “I expect even greater things out of you now, Mr. Weasley. Although I would be remiss as a professor to not take five points from Hogwarts for that dreadful lack of common sense. Attempting an enchanted meditation, outdoors and alone, without any of the proper preparation was simply foolhardy. We'd discussed that premature use of the Soul Seek spell could be counterproductive, if not outright dangerous.”

Percy feels so light that even the loss of points cannot faze him. “I had a realisation,” he explains. “I realised that I need not confine myself any more.”

McGonagall treats him to a rare smile. “I am glad, though admittedly nervous to see what you accomplish unconfined.”

He waves away the worry. “We can move on now, right?” Percy asks eagerly, pulling out a fresh set of scrolls to take notes on. “To the transformation?”

“It’s nice to see you acting your age,” McGonagall says fondly, and Percy blushes yet again. If only she knew how *unlike* his age he was acting. “But yes, we can move on. I’m afraid we will make little progress before the term ends, but we will begin nonetheless.”

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June 1990

McGonagall wasn’t exaggerating: little progress is made before Percy must dispiritedly board the Hogwarts Express, even though he spends nearly every waking minute working on his

transformation. The Map, the Founders' search, and even Tom Riddle fall to the wayside for the last few weeks as Percy practices growing claws out of his hand.

He has to admit, the form appeals to him. A clairvoyant; a spy; a keeper of secrets. It makes him wonder if his form would have been this all along, had he tried in the original timeline. Perhaps his soul was irrevocably changed by the ritual to send him back in time. Perhaps—and this is almost more frightening, or exciting—he always had form inside of him.

Either way, it is fitting, and he is pleased.

He sits with his classmates on the train home. Henry and Alexander had some sort of falling out, apparently, that Mariana assures Percy he was entirely privy to and yet Percy can muster up zero recollection of the incident. Allegedly, there had been a fight in the Common Room when Percy was *in the room*, but Percy isn't entirely sure that Mariana is telling the truth instead of just winding him up.

His classmates' squabbles do not bother him for long. He turns his attention to the window and taps in once again to that feeling of wild joy and resolve that he felt that day, realizing that he can let go of his self-censure and embrace his second chance. He is already righting his wrongs. Tom is coming to Hogwarts next year, and he will be ready.

ANTICIPATION (1/2)

Chapter Notes

> As always, thanks so much for all of your comments!!! I have gone back and replied to a bunch of them. Super fun to hear what you all think!
>
> Fifth year. OWLs, Dark Lords, and Harry, oh my.
>
> Posting this as two separate chapters, but I will have the second half up either end of the day or tomorrow. Hope that's a good compromise.

CHAPTER FIVE: ANTICIPATION (1/2)

1991 — 1992 (Percy is 15 & 28, Snape is 31, Quirrell is 24, Harry is 11 and newly arriving at Hogwarts).

June 1991

Percy takes the summer to do an essential task: homework.

He has prioritised his grades in this timeline, as he would in any timeline, due to some combination of pride and pragmatism. He will need outstanding grades for the position he hopes to receive at the Ministry. Many of his assignments do not take him long; he's nearly memorised several of his textbooks by now, particularly as his new way of learning magic by heart requires him to practise the same spells until they feel instinctive in his grasp.

This year, the Dark Lord is arriving at Hogwarts. This year, Harry Potter will face a shade of the Darkest wizard of the time and survive. This year, it will be absolutely *essential* that Percy has enough free time to accelerate his research into the Dark Lord.

Thus, using the copies of the syllabi he obtained from a fifth year, Percy writes a year's worth of essays, all meticulously researched and measured. Even if a professor changes one or two of the assignments, he is willing to bet the majority will remain the same. The OWL curriculum is fairly standard, though challenging.

The thought that being a Prefect would take up a significant amount of his time does little to assuage the hurt Percy feels when his Hogwarts letter arrives, sans badge.

"Not—not a Prefect?" His mother says, unable to hide her surprise. Both Bill's and Charlie's fifth year letters had borne badges: one Prefect, one Quidditch Captain.

Percy smiles thinly. As much as McGonagall enjoys their lessons, he knows she disapproves of his lack of *social integration*. “I imagine it’s due to my extracurricular schedule,” he says, turning to hide his disappointment. At least the kitchen is empty, as the younger set remains asleep despite the late hour. Even George is still asleep, though by now typically he would have made his way into the kitchen to have a cup of tea. “Did I tell you that Professor McGonagall and I finally figured out my form?”

Disappointment turns to surprise. “Oh, Perce, that’s *wonderful*,” his mother says, beaming. “What is it? Something manageable, I hope?”

“A lynx,” he reveals, feeling a very odd sensation.

“A *lynx,”* his mother breathes reverentially. “Well, a special form for a special boy.”

Percy correctly identifies the feeling squeezing his chest as pride, or more accurately, gladness that his mother is proud. It’s a strange feeling, at once familiar and unfamiliar. Molly Weasley has not felt proud of her son in two decades.

Compared to that, the sting of losing the Prefect badge quickly fades.

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September 1991

Percy takes it upon himself to ensure that Harry Potter meets Ronald Weasley.

Once they arrive at the Muggle side of King’s Cross, Percy causes them to linger by the barrier, claiming to be waiting for Henry, Gryffindor’s newest Prefect. “Henry wanted to help Muggleborns through, since he’s a Prefect,” he explains, and the reminder of Percy’s slight, his desire to help Muggleborns, and the invocation of an actual friend convince Molly to keep the brood there for a few more minutes. Percy does not know how Harry made his way onto the train in the first timeline, but all students are required to pass through the same barrier, so logic would dictate Harry will show up eventually in the stream of young witches and wizards clutching their trolleys eagerly.

A few people nod at Percy as they pass, though many more look at the gaggle of Weasleys curiously. Fred and George are hailed by a group of their peers and disappear, so at least Percy must only wait with his mother and two of his younger siblings, rather than four. To busy himself, he chats with Ron, trying a last minute effort to bolster Ron's confidence in his own bravery, which Ron, ungratefully, scorns with a dangerously wobbly scowl.

It is nearly eleven by the time that Percy watches a tiny Harry Potter approach, a snowy owl atop an oversized trunk, and feels something constrict inside of him. Harry is so *small*, so young. It is hard to imagine that this eleven year old will defeat the Dark Lord within a decade.

“Henry must be already inside,” Percy says quickly, trying to speak loudly. “We best get onto Platform 9 ¾ before the train leaves.”

Harry’s head turns toward them and he begins to walk faster. “Um, excuse me,” he calls out in a voice very soft and very high. Even for an eleven year old, Harry is so *small*, especially compared to Ron’s gangly frame. “Er, could you help me, uh—”

Luckily, his mother notices. “Get onto the platform? Of course, dear. It’s Ron’s first time too, you know.”

Ron and Harry eye each other and Percy relaxes. Right on schedule.

***

Harry disappears, although Percy keeps an eye on him. Third compartment from the end. “I’ll take Ronald,” Percy says pompously, once his mother is done fussing over Ron. “Keep him in line.”

“Not even a Prefect—”

“But still Perfect Percy,” the twins say, appearing from wherever they’d gone to. Percy tries to relax the tense set of his jaw. “Guess who we saw—”

“On the train!”

“Harry Potter!”

Ginny perks up. “Harry Potter?”

Percy rolls his eyes. It will never cease to shock him to contrast tiny Ginny and tiny Harry with their adult selves. Less auspicious beginnings can hardly be imagined. “Ginny, you’ll meet him next year. Ron, let’s go and get you a good compartment.”

“I want to go and meet Harry Potter,” Ginny says loudly, over his mother lamenting how lonely Harry looked.

“Ginny, *please*,” Percy begs, taking Ron firmly by the hand and pulling him away. “Now, Ronald. Don’t be frightened of the Sorting. Just hold your head high and be *brave*, yes?”

Ron wrenches his hand away, and Percy decides in his annoyance to not point out the smudge of dirt on his youngest brother’s nose. “Yes, Mum,” Ron says mockingly. “You didn’t do this to Fred and George.”

“I did too, and Bill and Charlie did it to me first,” Percy says, navigating Ron toward the compartment that he hopes Harry is in. “Now go make friends. I’ll be near the front of the train if you need anything.”

He leaves Ron nervously peering into the nearest compartment. “Excuse me, do you mind? Everywhere else is full.”

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Ron sorts Gryffindor. Hermione sorts Gryffindor. Harry sorts Gryffindor.

Percy barely eats any of the Feast. He is full of relief.

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The first day of term starts, and with it, so does Defence against the Dark Arts with a Dark Lord. Percy arrives early and sets his things down a few rows back, where he’d have an adequate vantage point but could avoid making eye contact with the professor.

His other yearmates file in and settle around him. Henry snags the seat next to Percy and Alexander next to Henry, their dispute apparently resolved. As is tradition, Percy exchanged only the most perfunctory of notes with his roommates over the summer, primarily to discuss their next year's schedules. He therefore only catches glimpses of the teenaged lives that fuelled their exchanges of owls over the summer. Since even those glimpses are exhausting, he doesn’t much mind his exclusion.

Quirrell’s lesson proceeds much as Percy remembers from the first time around. Quirrell stutters his way through an introductory lesson to the OWL-level Defence material, which should cover hexes, shields, and curses but instead covers Quirrell’s various trips around the world. Looking at the mutinous faces of the other fifth years—Slytherins and Gryffindors alike—Percy imagines this year will go much the same as it did last time, when the fifth years spent hours in the library trying to compensate.

It's strange; Percy figures that in a way, Quirrell is younger than him, at twenty-four, if he's done the math correctly. Twenty-four and harbouring the Dark Lord. Percy wonders, not for the first time, why Dumbledore tends to find young prospects right out of Hogwarts to ensnare in the grasp of the teaching profession. How long had Quirrell been the Muggle Studies professor prior to this—two, three years? He couldn't have been more than twenty by the time he was hired.

Perhaps Dumbledore cannot find *adults* to take on these roles. Perhaps he finds it easier to take almost-students and carefully, quietly influence them. Many Hogwarts professors stay at Hogwarts their entire adult lives. After repeating his Hogwarts tenure twice, Percy does not have a difficult time imagining what that would be like, but someone like McGonagall must have spent two or three times as long as him in her role.

But someone like Quirrell, shy, pale, and entirely forgettable, why had Dumbledore chosen *him* to be their Muggle Studies professor, and how had he wound up with a Dark Lord under his turban?

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McGonagall eyes Percy over her glasses.

Percy eyes her right back.

After a long pause, McGonagall huffs out a laugh. “I will not ask, Mr. Weasley, how it is that you managed to make progress over a summer where you are *forbidden to practice magic*.”

Between them, Percy flexes a paw in triumph. “Forbidden to practice magic *with a wand*, Professor,” he says innocently.

Of course, Percy’s wandless magic has improved to the point where he rarely needs his wand for most common spells, but that is a perk of being a time traveller that he keeps firmly to himself.

“Clearly, we need to update those slips,” McGonagall muses. She shakes her head decisively and leans over her desk to look at his paw more closely. They have begun meeting in her office instead of her classroom, which brings with it the surprising benefit of ginger cookies and tea. In contrast to Snape, McGonagall looks smaller in her office, more human, and considerably more friendly. “Well, what’s done is done. Tell me: how did you make progress? What changed?”

“It was like we talked about last term,” Percy begins thoughtfully. “After the Soul Seek spell, I thought a lot about magical affinity. Those meditation exercises we practised helped, too.” He hesitates. “It’s a bit foolish, but it was as if I could *feel* how the lynx’s magic would feel overlaid on mine.”

McGonagall transforms one of her own hands into her small cat’s paw and lays it next to Percy’s own. “That’s exactly it,” she says enthusiastically. “Excellent work, Mr. Weasley. *Affinity* is not exactly the term I would use, as we discussed, but it seems to be sufficient for now.”

“You say resonance,” Percy says, nodding. “I see why.”

“That’s why it’s a question of understanding your own magic, and I daresay, understanding what makes you *you*,” McGonagall continues. This they’ve discussed at length, but Percy nods along. A review of complex material is always useful. “You have to understand why the form is also you, but a new version of it, and why your human self is you, but the anchor.”

Percy frowns. “The anchor?” He isn’t sure that McGonagall has ever said it quite in that way, and he wonders if it is similar to the anchor on the Map.

She nods. “I believe you are familiar with the concept of a magical anchor, yes? An anchor ties a broader application of magic to a base source of knowledge and magical reserves. What the anchor knows, so to speak, the application knows.”

“And the application can later be an anchor,” he says, thinking of the updated version of the Map that he anchored off of the original.

“Yes, although that’s an older viewpoint,” she says, looking at him curiously. “You serve as an anchor for all spells that you cast, although those are temporal, of course. Here, your original form—who you are at the very essence of yourself, your unique mix of magic—must serve both as the anchor and the transformative force for your transformation. We have discussed this before, Mr. Weasley.”

He nods sheepishly.

McGonagall transforms her paw back into a hand, and back into a paw, and back into a hand. “To transform rapidly and seamlessly, your magic must understand how to split, as it were, more permanently. How to be both force and anchor.”

“It is no different from regular spells, though,” Percy says, frowning. “If our magic anchors all of our spells, our magic also serves as a force.”

“*You* serve as an anchor for your magic, which is a force,” Professor McGonagall corrects. She gives a small shrug. “It’s as I said last year, Mr. Weasley. Not everybody agrees with this view, for if we separate our sense of self from our sense of magic, the theory becomes a bit more—”

When she seems to struggle for the words, Percy breaks in. “Unbelievable?”

“Less concrete,” she emphasises. “Researchers do not like to speak of souls, particularly of souls separate from magic.”

“But souls are separate from magic,” Percy says, thinking again of the Map, thinking of Myrtle, thinking of the Dark Lord.

McGonagall takes a sip of her tea. “I would agree, but not all would. Nevertheless, being comfortable with the *theory* that one has some essence separate from one’s magic does tend to help in these transformations, I’ve found. You anchor your magic, and your magic works as a force to perform spells. Here, in an Animagus transformation, the line is more blurred.”

“Your soul and your magic have to work together,” Percy says thoughtfully. He turns his paw over again before concentrating and feeling it shift back into his hand. His hand is the only part of his body he has succeeded in transforming thus far. Something he had been stuck on was the idea that the transformation had to be instantaneous. He couldn’t concentrate on each part of his body and turn it one by one. “It has to be instinctive.”

“Yes,” McGonagall says. “Keep working on your hands. Try to do it with your eyes closed. Feel the magic collecting in your hand; feel yourself exerting a force. It matters less *how* your

body is changing, and more that you understand that *you* are powering this transformation with your will. We will work on feeling those dual sensations throughout the body."

He nods, feeling excitement, rather than magic, thrum through his body. His studies at Hogwarts this time have introduced him to so many ideas and theories he'd never even considered the first time. Everything seems to hinge on some combination of souls and magic, of resonance and affinity, of forces and anchors. Had it always been like this?

Had Riddle learned this, too?

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Myrtle does not know what the Room of Hidden Things is, but she promises to look for it. Her painting is still proudly hung outside her bathroom, and Percy even catches a young Hermione Granger surveying it one day.

"I painted that, you know," he says, causing her to jump with a squeak. He pretends not to notice her red-rimmed eyes, and she is completely unable to hide her look of relief that he does not mention her tears.

"You did? Why? Do all paintings animate in the Wizarding World?" Her questions are rapid fire, and he has to hide his amusement. On this younger Hermione, her curiosity is more endearing than it is on her adult self, where it is at times abrasive. Regardless, Percy had always liked Hermione the most out of that group of Ron's friends.

"Myrtle and I are great friends, actually," he says. "She's a good person to talk to if you are feeling lonely at Hogwarts."

Hermione purses her lip. "Who said I was feeling lonely at Hogwarts?"

"I still feel lonely at Hogwarts sometimes," he says, and it is surprisingly easy to admit this to child-Hermione. "I sometimes wonder if it would have been easier for me to be in Ravenclaw."

"At least they'd care about their lessons," Hermione says with a sniff.

"The thing about the Wizarding World that nobody tells you," he says, "is that most of the children grow up primarily socialising with their family and family friends. I believe in the Muggle world there is a concept of early schooling, yes? Children here come to Hogwarts and some of them may have only ever played with their own siblings. Think of my own brother; for the last few years he's been alone at home with my mum and Ginny. Plenty of purebloods are only children, so they may socialise only with a nanny or governess."

Primary school is one thing Percy hopes the Wizarding World learns to adopt.

"Is that why some of them are so—mean?"

Percy tries to look friendly, which is an expression that feels out of practice on his face. He wonders absently if he has been walking around with a scowl all this time. “I believe that is one contributing factor, yes,” he confirms. “The other is that to them, magic is nothing new. They don’t understand what you feel: how exciting it all is, how much of a gift it feels, how *infinite* magic can be.”

“You feel that, but you’re not Muggleborn.”

He ignores her obstinate tone. “It’s not about being Muggleborn. Plenty of Muggleborns become accustomed to magic quickly, too. I would advise you not to worry if your classmates don’t seem as amazed by levitating a feather as you. Most people find something that gives them that sense of wonder, but it might take longer, or come from an unexpected source. My roommate Oliver feels about Quidditch like I do about Transfiguration.”

Hermione snorts and Percy has to agree.

“Give them time, and yourself too,” he finishes. “The Wizarding World *is* infinite. You need not discover all its secrets in a day, and your classmates might have sources of wonder that you’d like to learn about, too. And in the meantime, talk to Myrtle, but tell her that Percy said she isn’t allowed to cry on you.”

He leaves her there with a small smile and feels unaccountably warm.

***

October 1991

He isn’t sure how the memory of his eleven year old brother fighting a mountain troll *slipped his memory*, but by Merlin, it did.

At least, Ronald seems to stop tormenting Hermione Granger. Goodness knows those two boys need somebody with an ounce of brains to keep them from dying.

***

Shelving some of his research into Tom Riddle, Percy fills his extra time by following Quirrell around the castle. Percy is proficient enough in shielding and disillusionment charms that he feels safe enough skulking around the castle in pursuit. He does not know what Quirrell—or Riddle—is looking for, but the man wanders aimlessly around the castle for *hours*. If Riddle is directing Quirrell intentionally, Percy cannot guess the purpose. Quirrell never seems to sleep, either. Perhaps he can’t; Percy remembers that Tom Riddle’s head is on

the *back* of Quirrell's, inside his questionable turban. How would he even *sleep?* His face down, Riddle's up?

Percy imagines someone literally being *in his head* for all of the humiliating intricacies of being a human and shudders. Riddle is presumably there for every bite, for every trip to the bathroom, for every cough, for every conversation. Merlin's beard. Percy does not know if he feels worse for You Know Who or for Quirrell.

When he cannot follow Quirrell in person, he does so on the Map, and in doing so makes a startling discovery, looking at the small printed *Tom Riddle* next to Quirrell's name.

The shade of Tom Riddle that lives in Quirrell's head *is enough of a soul to qualify*.

Percy wants to take the Map to Anthony and Myrtle immediately. It lends further credence to their current theory that portraits retain less of their soul than ghosts. Riddle's presence makes sense: the Dark Lord somehow uses this part of himself to resurrect himself into a body, suggesting the shade must be strong enough to count as at least a partially-complete soul. Percy would be willing to bet money that the diary, next year, would appear on the Map too. Myrtle is on the Map, as is the Fat Friar and Nearly Headless Nick, and even Peeves. Does that mean that ghosts retain as much of their souls as Horcruxes?

The idea excites Percy and he spends several minutes looking in breathless excitement around him, his hangings pulled tight around his bed, even though his roommates are all in the library miserably finishing a Transfiguration essay that Percy wrote several months ago. He feels suddenly, incredibly, isolated. Percy has, by all accounts, made significant progress in proving that ghosts retain some significant portion of their souls, but there is not a single person he can tell.

He shakes his head decisively and pushes his glasses up his nose. He'll find some way to tell Myrtle and Anthony, perhaps after Riddle is defeated. In the meantime, he has a Dark Lord to watch.

Quirrell spends a lot of time on the third floor corridor, as is to be expected. Percy was never fully privy to the details of the third floor, but he knows that Ron, Harry, and Hermione battle their way through some series of traps and face Quirrell at the end of the year. He had questioned it at the time, and he questions it now. Had the traps been merely to ensnare Quirrell? Had they been a test for Harry?

Percy picks a time when everyone, including Quirrell, is at supper and has a very uncomfortable encounter with a three headed dog as a result.

Gasping, Percy slams the door behind him and comes face to face with one Severus Snape, raising a sardonic eyebrow.

"Above the rules, are we, Weasley?"

"Just curious, Professor," Percy answers back.

Snape surveys him. It is strange to say, but the Dark Magic debacle almost seemed to thaw some of the forced formality required from Snape usually. If Percy were mad, he may even think that Snape respects him more for his extracurricular activities.

However, Percy is not mad.

“Curiosity is all well and good until you are dead, Mr. Weasley,” Snape says, almost cheerfully. “And if you were dead, you could not continue disappointing me every week.”

Percy quirks his lips. “Would that it were so easy.”

“Indeed, but as ever, I am not optimistic,” Snape drawls, turning them both away from the third floor.

Percy has two thoughts as he slinks away sheepishly: the first, he needs to figure out how to get past a three-headed dog.

The second, Snape can be rather funny.

***

It actually is not difficult to get past a three-headed dog, Percy finds after only an afternoon in the library. Music is theorised to put a Cerberus to sleep. Finding an opportunity to test his theory, however, is significantly harder. When Quirrell isn’t hovering around the third floor, Snape is.

Was Snape involved with Quirrell’s deception, or did he merely suspect Quirrell? Was he guarding the hallway on Dumbledore’s instruction?

Regardless of the strange and uneasy truce that Percy feels as though he has reached with Snape, he is not suicidal enough to try and find out.

***

November 1991

In his common room, Percy regards Scabbers thoughtfully. While the rat has, technically, changed hands, his life remains rather the same.

Scabbers is snoozing in a warm corner of the cage next to Ron. Percy had kept an eye on Scabbers over the past few years, of course, but the man/rat seemed to do little more than sleep. Percy had carefully warded his cage so that Scabbers could not escape or transform

from it, and had spent an afternoon last week silently casting as many tracking spells as he knew on Scabbers' body. Percy had never decided what to do with Peter Pettigrew, wanting to keep him as a trump card in case he needed to break Sirius Black out of prison.

Peter Pettigrew had become an Animagus, at this age. Percy wonders how he'd managed it. Did Pettigrew know of souls? Did he know what it felt like to have his soul and his magic touch? Or had he learned through sheer will, or by accident, or through the other boys forcing him along?

What is Percy going to *do* about Pettigrew, anyway?

Percy knows this story, at least. Harry enjoys talking about his godfather, enough that all two years of their shared lives (and several years of Sirius-the-Marauder) have been exhaustively covered in public and private stories alike. Sirius sees a photo of Pettigrew on the Egypt trip and breaks out. Pettigrew escapes and helps, somehow, to raise the Dark Lord.

Percy considers his options logically, as anyone ought to do.

Option A hinges on the assumption that Percy can destroy the Dark Lord before he rises. In that case, he can somehow contrive a reason in two years to show Lupin the rat and hope he recognises him.

Downsides to this plan include: not being sure if Percy can even destroy the Dark Lord until he rises; Percy's embarrassing lack of progress re: Horcrux destruction; and Percy having to hide his activities from Scabbers despite them sharing a castle for two more years.

Upsides, however, include destroying the Dark Lord within two years.

Option B is to try and let Pettigrew escape in two years and hope that he does what he needs to do to resurrect the Dark Lord. Downsides, of course, include the uncertainty inherent in allowing a man that lived as a rat for twelve years to resurrect a dark lord.

Option C is to kill Scabbers.

This idea does fill him with some trepidation, but he forces himself to think about it logically, noting it down on his parchment as well as the others. The problem is, Percy is beginning to believe, given his knowledge of souls, that the Dark Lord needs to fully resurrect himself before he can truly be killed. There is a regrettable gap in his knowledge regarding what form the Dark Lord takes between possessing Quirrell and being resurrected by Pettigrew. Unfortunately, Harry did not deem it necessary to reveal what, exactly, happened in that graveyard. Percy knows that Cedric Diggory dies, that Peter Pettigrew is involved, and that the Dark Lord returns.

He may need the Tournament plot to progress, as awful as it may be. Percy is nothing if not pragmatic, and the past few years have shown him that finding the Dark Lord's Horcruxes will be more difficult than he originally anticipated. He has no idea how the Trio managed to destroy them. They must have had prior knowledge of the objects and/or their locations. Percy has no proof, but he assumes Dumbledore must have told them before he died.

Dumbledore, obviously, has access to information that Percy will likely never get access to without revealing his secret.

Percy, however, can be resourceful, even if these past few years have been...frustrating. He is confident that, given enough time, he will be able to find out what the Horcruxes are and destroy them. (He *is* confident. He has to be. To consider otherwise would be...impossible). But, he may not be able to do it without the Dark Lord. He may not be able to destroy the Dark Lord in his incorporeal form. The Dark Lord may, paradoxically, need to gain enough of a soul to be permanently destroyed. All of Percy's research over the last several years seems to indicate that fact. Some sort of magic must force a physical cast to the Dark Lord's shade, so that he can be in a position to be harmed.

Thus, as Percy stares at Scabbers, he comes to a conclusion that he has been avoiding for several months: he has to set into motion the events that will eventually result in the Dark Lord's return.

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"*Take better care of him*?" Ron repeats, outraged. Tiny Harry and tinier Hermione look up at that and Percy clears his throat, feeling his ears burn.

"Not that you're not," he tries to recover. He feels Fred and George's attention from further down the table and tries to move the conversation along before the twins can get involved, thrusting forward Scabbers. "I found him out of his cage. He'll get lost, and he might die."

Ron gathers up Scabbers. "I can't keep him in there forever."

"All pets need regular exercise," Hermione pops in.

Percy gives her a look. As much as he tries to encourage intelligence in his peers—a thankless task, honestly—he does not care for Hermione's unnecessary additions to every conversation, something he knows from experience never fades. "Well, he's not dead yet," Percy says, holding out the cage. "Keep him that way. Take him out under controlled circumstances, not whenever you want."

"So take care of him yourself."

"It's OWL year, Ronald," Percy explains yet again, feeling a mild headache approaching. He shoots Hermione another look, but this time one marginally more pleading.

Luckily, Hermione needs only the slightest encouragement. "OWL year is so busy, Ron," she immediately confirms, reaching out for Scabbers herself. "Percy can hardly take care of a pet, too."

Ron groans, sensing a loss. "*Fine,*" he says. "But I don't have time to watch him all the time either."

“Just ask the house elves,” Percy says. “Don’t lose him, Ron.” *Or at least, until your third year,* he adds silently. Then, if all goes well, Scabbers will lose himself.

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December 1991

For Christmas break, the Weasleys stay at Hogwarts. (Charlie’s latest letter: *‘Mum’s gone mad and insisted she come stay at the reservation, Perce. Bill thinks it’s awfully funny, but I know she’s going to try and drag me back to England!’*)

Considering that this time last year, he’d been alone at Hogwarts, but he now finds himself with three of his siblings, he expects to find the holidays sentimental. It is instead rather the opposite. His family is fairly busy: Ron and Harry are spending a suspicious amount of time in the library, whispering frantically, and Fred and George are always together causing some sort of havoc.

McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout all cancel his lessons for the break. Snape, when asked, merely looks at him until Percy feels the need to flee. Percy does not want to remind Snape of *last* year’s Christmas and so does not push.

Thus somewhat at a loss, Percy spends a significant amount of time in the bathroom with Moaning Myrtle, discussing the Founder’s Objects, practising his transformation, and adding features to Percy’s Map.

“I think you should call this one Myrtle’s Map, for what it’s worth,” Myrtle sniffs at him before breaking into giggles.

Percy rolls his eyes. “I’ll take it into consideration,” he says dryly. They are working on a modification to let the Map expand itself into the hidden areas of the castle to find the Room of Hidden Things. Both Myrtle and Percy believe that the holes in the original Map are due to the Marauder's ignorance of certain rooms rather than a magical reason. The Slytherin dormitories, for instance, are conspicuously less detailed than Gryffindor tower. Professor Sprout’s office isn’t even on the Map.

Instead of going around the castle themselves, the pair thought they may be able to let the magic expand itself. This, however, has been unsuccessful thus far, and Percy pokes the Map with his wand in irritation. “Why won’t this *work*? The theory is sound!”

Myrtle swoops down and the edges of the Map flutter. “I had an idea, actually,” she said smugly. “It’s brilliant.”

“Doubtful.”

“It *is*, Percy Weasley, and don’t you doubt me,” Myrtle says huffily. She pauses, clearly waiting for him to ask what it is.

Once again, Percy rolls his eyes. Sometimes he wondered how he ended up here, with the ghost of a teenaged girl as his closest friend. “What is it?”

“Let me update it,” Myrtle reveals, flicking ghostly strands of hair out of her face.

“And how will you do that?” Percy begins packing up the Map, mentally moving on to the next problem for now.

Myrtle floats in front of him, wiggles her fingers at him, and then snatches the Map right out of his hands.

He drops it, feeling the icy touch of her hands on his own. “How did you *do* that?”

Myrtle’s smile is even more smug as she crosses her legs in the air and flips through the Map. “I’ve been practising,” she reveals. “You know how I can touch the things in my bathroom.”

Percy has received several very wet demonstrations of this, so he only nods.

“Well, I went and talked to Peeves, and it turns out that we can really touch anything as long as we concentrate; it doesn’t have to be the things we resonate with.”

After several more months of practising his transformation, Percy is far more familiar with the ideas of resonance and affinity than he once was, so he once again nods in agreement. “So you practised.”

Myrtle nods excitedly. “It’s a bit like how I remember casting a spell feels like,” she says dreamily. “Exerting your influence over something in the physical world. No wonder Peeves loves it so much.”

“If you become a poltergeist, I *will* leave you and I will *not* harbour any guilt over never speaking to you again,” Percy informs Myrtle, quite seriously.

She laughs and in her lapse of concentration, drops the Map on the floor. “Oh, bugger. But Perce, we know that once the Map physically is present in a location, the anchor works to fill in the details of what people are doing in that location. So in theory, all I have to do is take the Map to every room in the castle.”

Percy stoops to pick it up. “Well, I suppose if you promise not to lose the Map, this could work,” he says thoughtfully. “At least over Christmas, I don’t need it.”

Myrtle cheers and celebrates by causing all the pipes to spurt a burst of water into the air.

Percy splutters and raises a shield instinctively. “Merlin, Myrtle, *watch it*.”

“Sorry, Percy,” she says apologetically. “I’m just so excited to be able to help, finally.”

He refutes her instantly. “You have been helping. I’ve no one else to discuss my projects with.”

Myrtle settles back down on her customary perch to his side. “Are they all mean to you?” She asks sympathetically and eagerly.

He shrugs, uncomfortable both with the attention and the insinuation that his peers bully him. “No, of course not,” he hastens to assure her. “I just want to keep my projects secret, for now.”

Myrtle’s beam is, thankfully, not accompanied by aquatic feats. “So you trust me?”

“It seems like it,” he says heavily. He does trust Myrtle, and at times it gnaws at him to tell her the truth. She could be a useful asset. However, he can't shake the feeling that he cannot tell *anyone* even the slightest hint of the truth, not if he wants the truth to remain a secret. “Let’s move on. We have a potential lead on the cup, but nothing on Slytherin’s alleged locket or the diadem. Perhaps we have the wrong objects?”

At least he has some projects he *can* share, even if he cannot share the whole truth. Being a time traveller is lonely, at times.

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Percy spends Christmas itself in Gryffindor Tower. He is alone in his room, of course, though his brothers are in the Tower in their own rooms, likely up to no good. Ron is proving to be as troublesome as the twins, in his own way.

Percy finds that he cannot remember if he ever really *enjoyed* being in Gryffindor. He does not have too many fond memories of the Tower itself, not like some of his classmates. In both timelines, Percy enjoys the grounds more than his bedroom, and in this timeline, Percy tentatively adds Myrtle’s bathroom to the places he enjoys at Hogwarts.

Fred and George wake him at an unearthly hour. Percy blinks and finds to his surprise that his presents are in a pile at the foot of his bed.

“Leave me be,” he groans, flapping a hand at the twins. “Go wake Ron. Bring your presents to the tree in the Common Room.”

Fred and George salute him in unison and bounce off. Percy takes a few moments to collect himself, brush his teeth and hair, and change into more respectable robes. The other two, of course, forget their presents, and Percy rolls his eyes before levitating the whole batch. He’s proud of his levitation charm; he can extend the charm to control packages of different weights and direct them to different places. It’s so *satisfying* to see one’s hard work pay off, particularly in magic.

He brings the presents downstairs and finds his brothers gaping at Harry’s floating head.

Percy had already considered and dismissed the idea of stealing Harry’s invisibility cloak. There were too many unknown variables. Whoever gave Harry the cloak—logic suggests

Dumbledore—likely would be able to track the cloak, and Percy would not be able to explain why he had it. Not to mention that from the sounds of it, the cloak saved Harry from certain death at least once a term, or at the least from detention. Percy would not be able to forgive himself if he stole the cloak for himself and then Harry found himself offed by Quirrell in the middle of the night.

However, the Ravenclaw in Percy itches to study the cloak. "May I borrow that sometime, Harry?" he asks when the general hysteria and emotional revelations ("it was my father's!") seems to fade. "Not to use, of course, and you're welcome to be there when I do. I'd just like to study it a bit."

Harry eyes him uncertainly. They were never close, even in the previous timeline, but this Harry has encountered Percy only once or twice before. "Um, ok," he says cautiously.

Ron grins at Percy, looking uncharacteristically cheerful. "Perce'll be safe with it," he assures Harry. "He's just a gigantic swot."

Percy lets this one slide. It's the image he's been trying to convey, after all. (Also, he is a swot, he is adult enough by now to admit it).

After they open their presents and put on their Weasley sweaters, they relax onto the couches, sipping hot chocolate thoughtfully provided by the elves. Ron very emphatically does not attach the SPEW button that Hermione sent for him to the front of his sweater, although Harry does.

"*Elvish welfare,*" Ron grumbles when he catches sight of Harry's button again. Percy watches Harry agonise over the decision to remove the badge or further irritate Ron and decides to intercede.

"She's got a point, you know," he says, catching Ron's attention. "And it's a very impressive campaign idea for a first year." He vaguely remembers SPEW from the first time around, though he is almost positive that Hermione had waited several years before starting her efforts.

"She said she was going to ask her mum how to knit," Ron reveals, widening his eyes. "She's absolutely *mental*. And it's your fault."

Percy splutters. "Pray tell."

"You told her that I could ask the house elves to watch Scabbers," Ron complains. "Next thing we know, it's *slave labor* this, *slave labor* that."

George speaks up from where he'd been listening quietly. "She should at least talk to the elves," he points out. He's very fond of the elves, Percy recalls. "We talk to them all the time. They love working."

"Because Dumbledore is a kind master," Percy points out. He doesn't have an Thestral in this race, necessarily, but he does see where Hermione is coming from with the idea of elvish

welfare. “Other masters are not kind at all. And welfare can mean many things. Maybe they want more to clean.”

George shrugs. “I suppose,” he says unwillingly. “She *should* talk to them, though.”

“Tell her,” Harry pipes in quietly. He flushes a little when all the Weasleys look at him. “I mean, um, if you want her to do it. She would, too.”

Ron starts to grin. “She’ll go take a survey, I bet,” he says, clearly imagining it. He mimics her, and not kindly. “Excuse me, do you have enough to clean? Is the laundry dirty enough for your tastes?”

The rest of the Weasleys laugh, but Percy narrows his eyes at Ron. He does not want Ron to be *mean*. Particularly if him being mean results in him losing Hermione Granger as a friend. Percy firmly believes, after several years of observing the Trio, that none of them would have made it very far alone. He does not mean that in an emotional sense; he instead has a strong suspicion that only by working together can each member overcome their natural proclivity to be idiotic. Even Hermione, the most intellectually intelligent of the Trio, has moments where Percy truly must question her judgement.

Later, after Fred and George excuse themselves to go find Lee Jordan, Percy speaks to Ron and Harry before they can escape. “Ronald, I’ve noticed you spending more time in the library,” he begins. “While the idea of you taking your studies seriously brings me quite a lot of joy, I doubt you two are studying for classes over break.”

Ron looks at him suspiciously. “It’s none of your business.”

Percy raises an eyebrow. “I am not trying to stop you,” he says placatingly. “I am offering my services. I, as you may know, am an *excellent* researcher.”

This is the understatement of the century, but he is talking to eleven year olds. He keeps his pitch simple.

“Ron,” Harry says cautiously when Ron appears to be thinking about it.

“It would have to stay a secret,” Ron says finally, “and you can’t ask us why we are looking it up.”

Percy nods. “I will,” he says earnestly. He will most likely not need to ask *why* they are researching something; he is confident he can work it out himself.

Ron and Harry both eye him suspiciously. Ron says, “Why do you want to help?”

“It’s Christmas, and there’s not much to do,” Percy says somewhat untruthfully. There are a number of things to do and far too little time to do it, but Percy does want to figure out what mystery these three spend their first year solving. Percy is willing to bet whatever scheme they create is what results in Quirrell’s death. “You know how I get when I’m bored.”

Ron does, in fact, know how Percy gets. Just like before, he vouches for Percy, something that Percy will only admit in the spirit of the Christmas Holidays warms his heart.

“Nicholas Flamel,” Harry says when Ron gives him the go-ahead. “Who is he?”

Percy blinks. Nicholas Flamel? That was *not* what he was expecting them to say. How does Nicholas Flamel relate to Voldemort?

Well, actually, there is one very obvious way that Nicholas Flamel relates to Voldemort.

“The Philosopher’s Stone,” Percy says, answering both his and Harry’s questions at the same time. “It’s a fabled stone of immortality, said to be able to turn metals into gold and help create the Elixir of Life. If you look up *Historical Magical Artefacts* by P.E. Plumpkin, it’ll be in there, and if not, I can look for the right book for you. And Ron—you ought to research house elves before you argue with Hermione about her cause. If she cares about something so strongly, it'll just hurt her feelings to have you ridicule her efforts.”

They dash off after mumbling awkward thanks, excited to go to the library for what Percy would bet is the first and last time in their Hogwarts careers. Percy cannot say whether his admonition to Ron would have any effect, but at least he tried, which is more than he would have done in the first timeline.

Percy remains alone in the Gryffindor Common Room, thinking about this new challenge. It has just become abundantly clear what is behind the third floor corridor, and why Quirrell is in the school.

The question is, *why.*

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Percy thinks about it for several hours as he freezes half to death walking around the lake—Percy is trying to exercise more, now that he has hit puberty again—and comes to the conclusion that Dumbledore is luring Riddle to the school.

This implies several things to Percy.

The most jarring is that Dumbledore knows that the Dark Lord was not entirely defeated. Percy thinks the probability that Dumbledore knows of the Horcruxes is low but non-zero. If he doesn’t know, he presumably finds out within the next few years, likely after Ginny is possessed by the diary. If he does know, he must have concluded that he needs Riddle himself for many of the same reasons that Percy wants to wait for the Dark Lord’s resurrection, namely that Voldemort may have to be more ‘whole’ before one could kill him. Or, more likely, Dumbledore either does not know what the Horcruxes are yet or does not know how to destroy them. If he could trap the shade of Voldemort, he may be able to figure out both of those things.

Percy for a very wild second considers whether *he* could trap the shade of Voldemort.

Then, he pictures Severus Snape giving him a very hard slap. He is not a child anymore. He does not rush into plans. He does not make plans that are not executable. Percy is *pragmatic* and *realistic* and that is why he will actually kill the Dark Lord instead of just fantasising about it. Harry should defeat Quirrell, as scheduled.

(As planned?)

There's the other dimension of this to consider. Why wait? Perhaps Dumbledore just found out about the Horcruxes, but what would have triggered that? How long has the Dark Lord possessed Quirrell? How would Dumbledore even have figured it out?

Again, Percy must be logical. The simplest explanation is often the most correct. It does not make sense that the shade of Voldemort possessed Quirrell for much longer than the past year or two. For starters, possession of that sort is usually fatal for one or both parties. To continue, Percy feels as though by now he has a relatively good understanding of Tom Riddle. He cannot picture a scenario where Tom Riddle has a consciousness and the ability to possess people for longer than a year and then decides to do nothing until Harry Potter is eleven. Why not possess the Minister of Magic? Why not infiltrate Hogwarts sooner? Why not kill Albus Dumbledore?

No, what is more likely is that the Dark Lord has not always had the strength to possess someone. He can't have been living in Quirrell's head for too long. What is more likely is this: something *spurred* Tom into action. Something made it worth the risk.

Something like the Philosopher's Stone, conveniently hidden in Hogwarts just in time for the Chosen One to arrive. A double bait or trap for Tom, or a test for Harry?

Either way, Percy feels as though this was planned far in advance by one Albus Dumbledore.

ANTICIPATION (2/2)

Chapter Notes

Clearly when I said "today or tomorrow," I meant that in a very liberal sense. Working on revising year six, which finally brings with it Tom.

Also, a few of your comments have pointed out some plot holes that I missed. Just to expose myself, I realised I took out a sentence in the first chapter where Ron says the word "Horcrux," which gives Percy his initial lead. Going to add that back in, nothing to see here....

I also had a lot more written about Percy in Hogwarts, his relationship with his peers (like Landon and Henry), and a whole subplot about Flitwick. I took it out because I felt this story was getting a bit too lengthy, but if there is interest, I am thinking I could post another work that has some of these "deleted scenes." Let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER FIVE: ANTICIPATION (2/2)

1991 — 1992 (Percy is 15 & 28, Snape is 31, Quirrell is 24, Harry is 11 and newly arriving at Hogwarts).

January 1992

One more notable thing happens over Christmas, but Percy does not like to think about it.

He sees one shining, frozen moment of perfection in a mirror: his family, whole and grateful and alive, their faces turned toward him, gratitude shining from their matching brown and blue eyes. Myrtle hovers behind him, smiling impishly. His older self looks out proudly and serenely, Unspeakable robes around his body, locket around his neck, sword and cup resting behind him, and the glint of the diadem on his head. In his eyes is the assurance of a man who has solved every problem laid at his feet. In the hard set of his face is victory.

Percy looks at it for a very long time before he steps away and does not look back. He forbids Ron and Harry from returning and does not return himself. This mirror shows only his desires, nothing more, and Percy knows better than to linger on his desires.

(In both universes, it takes more than a warning to deter Harry. In both universes, neither Ron nor Percy feel the same, wild urge to visit every night that the small Chosen One feels deep

inside his core.)

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The rest of the winter holidays is lonely and sleepless, Percy laying awake in the empty silence of his dormitory, staring up at the blood-red curtains as the wan winter moon shines through the high tower window. The night before school term resumes, Percy cannot bear the image on the back of his eyelids any more, and swings his feet out of bed, sliding his socked feet into his sturdy day shoes and slipping his Weasley sweater over his head as protection against the chill.

Snape is in his chambers, preparing for the following day; Quirrell is in the Forbidden Forest, and Percy is not fool enough to follow him there. He runs his eyes over the original Map, checking for other threats: Filch, in his office; McGonagall, in her rooms; Flitwick, in the staff room. Dumbledore is not on the Map, but he so rarely is at the school that Percy discounts him as well.

He carefully casts a Disillusionment Charm. Percy is used to the slimy feeling trickling down his neck by now and does not even flinch. He's become quite adept at sneaking around; his shoes are enchanted to be quiet, his clothes have been spelled to the best of his ability against rustling, and he even recently found a smell to eliminate odours.

For all his midnight preparations, however, he finds Myrtle waiting for him by the entrance to the third floor.

"I can still see you, you know," she says, quite gleeful at his obvious distress. She waves what she continues to call Myrtle's Map. "Forgot I had this, did you?"

Percy rolls his eyes, some of the melancholy underpinning his solemn nightly actions banished by her chilly presence. Blast. "I hardly expected you to be stalking me," he sniffs, holding out an invisible hand for the new Map. "How can you see me, anyway?"

"Disillusionment Charms don't work on ghosts," Myrtle reveals. "We get to follow students sneaking about and see what mischief they're up to, you know. But *I* never report a student unless she's doing something she ought to get reported for." Myrtle giggles dreamily. "Particularly the students going for a *rendezvous* on the Astronomy Tower."

"Thanks for that image, Myrtle," Percy says dryly. Myrtle is rather obsessed with teenagers, which he theorises is due to her own girlhood being cut short. That, or the fact that the only company she's had for fifty years are her fellow ghosts and a smattering of lonely girls.

"So what mischief are we causing?"

"*We* are not causing any mischief," Percy insists. "You can stand guard. I want to see what's past the first line of defence."

Myrtle's pout shimmers in the dark corridor. "You said you trusted me, Percy. You said we're *friends*." She looks at him slyly from under curling gray eyelashes and adds imperiously, "I'm coming with you, and that's final."

"Myrtle," Percy groans. "It may be dangerous."

"Yes, for you," she points out triumphantly. "I doubt anything in there can hurt me. Like you said, I can be your guard. I'll go for help if anything goes wrong."

Percy checks his watch, considering this. He doesn't know how long Quirrell will be in the Forbidden Forest; he wouldn't put it past the Dark Lord to insist on a late night visit to the third floor. "Fine," he says ungraciously. "But if something goes wrong, go to McGonagall or Snape, not Flitwick or Sprout."

He pulls out a small music box that he'd found in his holiday perusal of the other dormitory rooms, belonging to some sentimental first year who'd left it on his bedside table. Percy imagines the look of glee on Alexander's face if Percy had brought a similar item to their room, even at eleven, and has to debate with himself whether it would be a mercy to "lose" the item beneath the boy's bed when he returns it.

"*Alohamora*," says Percy quietly. One of the spells he is entirely proficient at wandlessly. Before he opens the door, he taps on the music box with his wand. It begins playing softly, almost eerily in the otherwise complete silence of the corridor.

The door opens with a soft click. Myrtle dashes in and reports back that the Cerberus ("There's a *Cerberus* in *Hogwarts?"*) is asleep. Holding his breath and replenishing all of his protective charms, Percy carefully walks into the room.

Myrtle kneels and tugs at the trapdoor, but she isn't strong enough to lift it, even with her poltergeist practice. Percy motions her aside with a stern look and casts a silent levitation spell. He can control it enough to carefully and slowly lift the door, letting it settle on the floor with a soft creak.

"Down," Percy mouths at her, and Myrtle obediently swoops down. He has to admit that having a ghost is a useful adventure partner, if only for the advanced notice.

"Some sort of plant," she whispers in his ear, her breath a chilly gust. "I can't see."

Percy worries his lip and then inches over to the trapdoor, sending a small ball of light down. He can see the plant: a writhing mess of vines that retreats slightly when the light reaches the bottom. Devil's Snare. It's not a particularly dangerous plant if one has advanced warning. Percy holds his breath and jumps into it, sending several balls of light out of his wand as soon as he lands with a thud in the middle of the vines.

A few seconds later, he slides into the room at the bottom. Myrtle flies through the plant and joins him, giggling. "That was easy," she says enthusiastically.

Percy nods, but he does not smile. "Too easy."

Quirrell has been keeping guard on the third floor for months now. Percy refuses to believe that the man would be unable to get past at least the three-headed dog and the Devil's Snare, particularly when possessed by the Dark Lord. Perhaps the defences get progressively harder?

The two trudge in silence down a downward sloping passage, only to blink in surprise as they emerge into a brilliantly lit room with dozens of birds. No, keys, Percy amends, seeing a brass key fly by his ear.

Flitwick, he thinks to himself.

Percy incants a spell McGonagall taught him, meant to help students understand the idea of magical resonance. Most of the keys glow a soft blue, but one of them— *there* —glows orange. When he repeats the spell on the door, the lock glows the same fiery colour.

After that, it's easy. A quick *Immobulus* stops the keys' flight and a carefully targeted *Accio* summons the orange key.

"It's too easy," Percy says out loud. Myrtle stops examining the keys and turns to him.

"Why is this even here?"

Percy wars with what to tell her. "I'm not sure, but I think it is to guard something," he says slowly. "But these defences are rather easy to pass, aren't they?"

"For a good wizard," Myrtle says. "Not for a ghost."

"But an average wizard."

Myrtle shrugs. "Maybe the thief isn't expected to be an average wizard. Maybe the expected thief is a ghost, or a shoddy wizard."

He thinks about this while they continue to the next challenge. Perhaps Dumbledore expected the Dark Lord to be a shade? Maybe the man doesn't know that Quirrell is possessed. Perhaps these challenges would stymie a shade. But why not just store the Stone in some sort of unbreakable container?

"Chess!" Myrtle crows excitedly as they reach a large stone cavern.

And suddenly, Percy has his answer: *it's a game*.

The challenges are set up like a game to keep the Dark Lord playing, he theorises. If Dumbledore does not know Quirrell is possessed—and if he *does* know, allowing that man to teach is simply unforgivable—then he would want to keep the Dark Lord engaged until Dumbledore can figure out how to defeat him. Perhaps these challenges could feasibly be overcome by a shade, though with great difficulty? Maybe the last challenge will be an unbreakable box of some sort. Let the Dark Lord bide his time defeating three headed dogs and winged keys, while the true prize lays protected elsewhere.

His theory makes sense, Percy decides firmly, nodding to himself. He turns to the giant chessboard and smiles fondly. It is obviously Professor McGonagall's contribution. This one, at least, he has heard of before, although he didn't quite realise that chasing the Philosopher's Stone was how Ron encountered a giant chess set. Ron had always described it as if they had merely stumbled upon it one day.

Beating the chess set is not difficult either. He finds it capable of merely executing basic manoeuvres, and Myrtle, as a ghost, is not compelled to compete. She cheers encouragement from the sidelines while Percy directs from the position of king.

The Dark Lord would *certainly* be capable of beating this chess set, Percy concludes as he steps off the chess set and moves to the door. Behind him, the pieces straighten and reassemble in their original positions. All the Dark Lord would need is a body to activate the magic.

Therefore, Dumbledore must not realise the Dark Lord already has a body.

Percy does not have time to think about it, because all of a sudden, he's fighting a mountain troll.

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Gasping, Percy staggers to the next chamber and collapses, barely noticing how flames spring up besides him. Myrtle collapses next to him, giggling weakly.

"Did you see how I shot at his eyes?"

Percy cannot respond. If it had not been for Myrtle, he would likely be dead. The relative placidity of the last few challenges lulled him into a false sense of confidence. It had taken far more than a simple *Immobulus* to immobilise the mountain troll.

Myrtle had flown into its face repeatedly, distracting and enraging it, while Percy struggled to gather his wits. It had taken three layered *Stupefys* and a freezing charm to fell the beast, and Percy had only managed to steal the time to conjure those spells because Myrtle had shouted at him to transfigure a barrier to momentarily keep the troll back.

Percy adds *reflex training* to his mental list and shakes his head, collecting himself.

"Thank you," he says shakily to Myrtle.

"You're not a very fast spell caster, are you," Myrtle says in response.

The familiar urge to roll his eyes further steadies Percy, and he gets to his feet. This challenge, he discerns instantly, is Snape.

But the puzzle is *easy*. The earlier sense of frustration returns as he scans the riddle and quickly discerns which bottle to drink. Tom Riddle would most definitely be able to solve this instantly.

The next room is empty.

Percy's first reaction is frustration. His second reaction is relief. This room, he thinks, will be harder for a Dark Lord to get through. Maybe the Stone is hidden in here, concealed in the walls or in a hidden trapdoor. He looks around and suddenly feels a dawning panic. Perhaps this room is the room designed to trap the Dark Lord.

(Where was Vector's challenge, or Trelawney's, or Sinistra's? Were the challenges only from the professors in the Order? Just the Heads of Houses? Whose challenge was the troll—Quirrell's? None of it really makes *sense*. Dumbledore must be playing a game that Percy cannot recognise).

"Myrtle," Percy says, very slowly, tamping down on the panic that threatens to overwhelm him. "Can you go back into the other room and see if you can get back in here? If you can't, give it thirty minutes and then go for help. Er, Snape or McGonagall, in that order."

Myrtle quickly dips out and then dips back in. "The room has reset," she reports. "The bottles are filled and the fire is back. But I can come back here."

Percy turns and looks at the fire behind him. "There is a non-zero probability that I am stuck in here," he says, fighting to keep the panic out of his voice. His mind whirls through the possibilities: could Myrtle throw the bottle through the fire? Should he get help? Is there another room?

Myrtle echoes that thought a second later. "We don't know if this is the end," she points out. "If all the professors were involved, there would be dozens of rooms."

"True, true," Percy says distractedly, taking out his wand. "You keep an eye on the Map. I'll look for a way out."

He begins casting detection charms, the systematic process clearing the panic from his mind. One has to do these things in the proper order, without rushing. He first checks for humans and finds none; he then checks for ghosts, and finds only Myrtle; and finally he checks for animals, and once again finds nothing. The flames, though enchanted, are undoubtedly hot enough to be dangerous, and none of the many flame-freezing charms that Percy knows are sufficient to quell their heat.

Then he begins examining the walls. He looks for hidden compartments and glistening wards. He casts the Affinity Spell and the walls glow faintly, merely indicating that they were magically constructed by the same person. He runs his hands over the surfaces and even sends Myrtle in all directions to look for tunnels or passageways. The ceiling is clear of enchantments, the floor is solid rock, and the only way in or out of the room is through the black fire dancing in the doorway.

Temporarily stymied, Percy conjures himself a chair and sits, delicately crossing his legs.

Myrtle ducks back into the room. “All rock in that direction,” she says, indicating the last wall. She shudders. “I hate passing through rock. It’s so *solid*. It feels like you’ve just eaten a very large meal and you want to throw up.”

Percy wearily puts aside the question of how Myrtle remembers that sensation and instead focuses on his predicament. “And you can’t throw the bottle in here, or carry it through.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t fly through the fire, and I can’t bring the bottle through the wall,” Myrtle says for what is maybe the fifth time. “I tried to throw it through, but it bounced off the flames.”

Percy bites his lip, thinking over his options. “I can’t Apparate in Hogwarts,” he says grumpily. “Note to self, research *why*.”

“I can get help,” Myrtle offers half-heartedly. Neither of them want to cut their adventure short so soon, and while both McGonagall and Snape do offer Percy a longer leash than most, he shudders to think of their anger finding him at a place so blatantly out of bounds. Good thing he’s not a Prefect, he thinks to himself bitterly.

“No. There’s got to be some way out. The professors come in here, I’m sure. They wouldn’t have had a room that is impossible to get out. There must be some failsafe.”

“It’ll be morning soon,” Myrtle points out unhelpfully. “Best find it soon, or you’ll miss breakfast.”

“Do professors have some way to get around Hogwarts that students don’t?” Percy asks finally, ignoring her comments.

Myrtle thinks about it. “Sometimes they use house elves, if they have to get somewhere really quickly. Otherwise I think they just walk.”

“Professors can call house elves? Can students?” Percy sits up. Stupid, *stupid*. Of course they can. That would explain how professors can appear at the scene of a disturbance nearly instantly, even if their classrooms are on the opposite side of the castle.

Myrtle shrugs. “I think so. Not sure I’ve seen anyone do it, but I don’t really pay too much attention to the elves, to be honest.”

“House elf!” Percy calls at once. “I summon a Hogwarts House Elf. I am a student of Hogwarts and—”

This additional entreaty proves to be unnecessary, as a small and wrinkled house elf pops into existence right in front of Percy. Percy and Myrtle exchange looks of glee. “Mimsy, sir, here to serve a student of Hogwarts,” the house elf chirps, sweeping a low bow. The elf looks around it and gives a visible double take. “Student of Hogwarts, sir, is in a forbidden place.”

“It was an accident,” Percy says primly. “Can you take me out of here, to a non-forbidden place?”

“Mimsy is not *supposed* to pops students,” the house elf considers out loud thoughtfully. “But you is in a bad place, you is not supposed to be here, Student of Hogwarts, sir.”

“Just take me where you came from.” Percy holds out an encouraging hand, trying to dampen his impatience with the creature. He knows that house elves struggle with conflicting commands, and this must certainly be a conflict. “You’re not doing anything wrong. Just helping a student of Hogwarts.”

“Mimsy supposes she can iron her ears if she needs to,” Mimsy says doubtfully and pops him away.

He appears in the kitchen. House elf magic is wonderful, really so much more calming than Apparation. It’s been so long in this life since Percy had the ability to magically appear anywhere that he luxuriates in it for an entire thirty seconds before he refocuses. It is nearly morning and so there are several house elves bustling around, rolling out pastries for breakfast. His stomach rumbles, and before he knows it, Mimsy has reappeared at his elbow with a strong black tea and eggs on toast, his preferred breakfast.

He takes a seat, munching on his toast thoughtfully. He feels like he’s hit upon something, but he isn’t exactly how to best use this new knowledge. “Mimsy,” he calls, and she reappears again. “Can you go anywhere in Hogwarts?”

Mimsy nods proudly. “Mimsy knows the whole castle,” she says proudly. “Mimsy works very hard.”

“If I gave you a task, Mimsy, would you be able to keep it a secret? *Extra work*,” he says enticingly. Myrtle is not going to be pleased with him for taking her task, and to be fair, she has made significant progress over the holiday break. But Myrtle is limited by not being able to carry objects through walls and so some rooms she is entirely unable to enter with the Map, even if she knows of their existence.

Mimsy thinks about it. She shoots a glance around her, but none of the other elves pay her any mind. “Depends on the work,” she says, her low tone almost conspiratorial. “Mimsy is *very* fast worker. Not enough work for Mimsy.”

“You look like a very efficient elf,” Percy says with approval. He holds out the Map. “All I want is for you to visit every room in the castle, with this.”

Mimsy looks at it doubtfully. Cleared, it looks like normal parchment. “Mimsy would never dare to asks why, but if Mimsy *were* so bold, Mimsy would asks why Student of Hogwarts, sir, wants Mimsy to take a blank parchment around the castle,” she says, very innocently.

Percy chuckles, his fondness for this elf growing by the minute. “I am Percy,” he introduces himself. “I am doing a survey of the castle for a project. I am just trying to get a list of every room.”

“Mimsy doesn’t know how to write, Master Percy, sir,” she admits, twisting her ears. “Mimsy is not a good enough elf to help Master Percy sir with his project. Mimsy will iron—”

“Stop,” he orders, and her mouth clicks shut. “Do not punish yourself unless I ask you to. It’s tiresome.”

She nods, her ears flapping frantically.

“All Mimsy needs to do is take this paper into every room, and the magic will fill it in,” he instructs carefully. “Do not tell anybody and return it to me when you are done. If you lose this paper, Mimsy, I will be *very upset*, do you understand? I will punish you myself.”

Mimsy nods again, even more frantically. “Mimsy will never,” she bursts out. “Mimsy will guard magic parchment with her life, Mimsy will, Mimsy will help Master Percy sir with his projects, Mimsy is a good elf, Mimsy will—”

“Stop,” he orders again, wearily. “Do you promise to do the task and not to tell anyone?”

Mimsy nods. “Mimsy promises, sir,” she says, cocking her ears earnestly. "Mimsy very sneaky."

Percy dismisses her after putting a tracking charm on the Map. He's reasonably certain nobody would be able to open it easily if it is lost, and he has the other version in his pocket, anyway.

***

The first week of classes is horrid.

Percy is tired after his fruitless nightly adventure. He yawns his way through Potions—Snape eyes him but does not directly comment—and Arithmancy, ducking his head to avoid Vector's glare. Over lunch, he sits away from his peers, as is his custom. He reads through his notebook, trying to centre himself. Keeping track of so many simultaneous projects is *exhausting.*

Landon and Henry slide on the bench next to him. Percy does not react, hoping they will take the hint.

They do not. Henry even has the audacity to lean over Percy's shoulder to look at his notebook. Luckily, Percy developed a charm to make it nonsense to other people.

"Hello, Percy, how was your break?" Landon finally says sardonically when Percy does not acknowledge his presence for several seconds. Henry snickers.

Percy mentally groans. He likes his yearmates more and more each year as they transform into something approaching adults, but sometimes he wishes they would all leave him alone, for Merlin's sake. "Unproductive," he says, flipping the page. He was planning on rewriting his to-do matrix during the lunch hour, but he feels uncomfortable doing that in front of his peers, not quite trusting the charm would disguise his movements.

"Thank you for the Christmas gift," Landon continues doggedly. At this, Percy looks up in confusion. "Yes, the Christmas gift that you didn't get me, despite me sending you gifts for the last three years."

"I don't typically do gifts," Percy says, entirely truthfully. He hadn't gotten anybody that wasn't a family member a gift in nearly three decades.

"You're very hard to be friends with, you know that? You're such a prat." Landon storms away and Percy watches him, entirely nonplussed.

Henry clears his throat. "Did you forget he invited us to his Christmas Ball?"

"His what?"

Henry, normally so calm, looks at him with something approaching disgust. "His annual Christmas Ball. The Greengrass family has it every year."

Percy thinks back. He supposes he can faintly recall Landon mentioning the Christmas Ball once or twice. "He invited us?"

"You really are a prat, Perce," Henry says, shaking his head. "Landon turned fifteen this year, so he was named heir presumptive to the Greengrass family. That means he can issue invitations of his own. He was really excited about inviting some of us, especially since—"

Percy raises an eyebrow in the sudden silence. "Especially since…"

"Well," Henry says uncomfortably. "Since you and Theodora aren't, er, traditionally invited to Greengrass events."

A Weasley and a Muggleborn, and a foreign one at that. Yes, neither Percy nor Theodora would have been invited to the Greengrass Ball. Old resentment, nearly buried, licks at Percy; resentment that had, once, driven him to reject his family and seek out *more* for himself.

The resentment curdles in his stomach and he stands, sweeping up his things. "Since I doubt I would have been welcomed anyway, perhaps it is good I did not attend."

He leaves Henry sitting there, gazing after him in frustration.

***

Percy spends the rest of the day impatiently going through the motions of his day. Now that he is finally in his OWL classes, he cannot while away every class by concentrating on his other projects; for one, his professors require much more active participation, and for another, Percy is not *so* familiar with the minutiae of each lesson that he can afford to entirely tune out

the proceedings. But later, in his bed, he is able to close his eyes and clear his mind, going through the motions of his nightly sort.

A few things are clear. He pulls up a mental sheet of parchment in his mind and begins a new to-do list, which he'll copy over first thing in the morning to his journal. The first point to cover is that he is not nearly as good in an emergency as he always thinks he ought to be. He'd frozen when the troll attacked and panicked in the last room. If Myrtle hadn't been there both times, he could be dead, or trapped.

He's been practising duelling for the last five years, but in a very *theoretical* way. He knows enough spells for nearly any challenge, of course, and he can cast many of them wordlessly and four of them wordlessly, but he *does* need to work on his speed. It should be trivial once he forms a training plan; duelling is just reflexes, after all. He will have to think of something. Perhaps Tonks can suggest to him some sort of strategy.

The second point to consider is thus: whatever Dumbledore is planning has not yet coalesced into fruition. The Stone is not yet in the Challenges, if it ever will be for real, unless Percy had completely failed something obvious in the final room, which he does not think is particularly likely given his in-depth examination of it while trapped. Either the Stone is fake bait or Dumbledore has reasonable cause to believe that Quirrell will wait a while longer to strike. If Percy remembers correctly, the Trio does not perform their stunt until quite late in the year, after exams. Something is holding the Dark Lord back.

The third point follows, given point two: the Stone is hidden somewhere else. Percy lies in his bed and stares at the hanging, thinking about it. *The Philosopher's Stone*. Not that he would *use* it, necessarily, but he has to admit it would be helpful. Of course, he isn't fool enough to attempt the Elixir of Immortality. He's read the literature about the wizards who fail at the task; Snape rather gleefully sets all sixth year students to that essay, just in case any of them have any delusions of grandeur. But the Stone can turn things into gold. His money problems would be entirely abated.

He could purchase all of the books that he needed; he could perfect his disguises; he could even buy relics and pose as a wealthy collector, infiltrating Borgin and Burke's. He could mingle with high society, he could make rare potions. He could use the gold to save the world.

And then, he would return it. Percy is fair. He wouldn't keep it forever, just until the war was over and he had no need for gold. He could return it anonymously to Nicholas Flamel and nobody would be the wiser.

***

February 1992

Despite four years of tension leading up to the Dark Lord arriving at Hogwarts, Percy has to admit that the shade does very little. Quirrell seemingly ignores Harry completely, never even approaching Gryffindor Tower. He wanders the Forbidden Forest nearly every night, but for what purpose, Percy can only guess. His current theory is that he is collecting ingredients for a restorative potion of some sort, particularly since he seems to spend every full moon in the Forest. Snape follows Quirrell almost as obsessively as Percy. Of course, he does not have the advantage of a magical Map and so must risk the Dark Lord's ire.

It is strange, of course, that if Dumbledore believes the Dark Lord is to return, he still allows his spy to get so close to Quirrell. What is Snape's alibi, merely distrust of a rival professor?

His yearmates are giving him the cold shoulder, which Percy only notices when Snape points it out in a Potions lesson. He has been working alone in class, he supposes, but he'd refused to admit he missed Landon as his Potions partner. After all, he is significantly more efficient on his own, without Landon's constant chatter in his ear.

"It does not faze you," Snape comments when Percy replies something to that effect. "Your exclusion."

Percy shrugs. "Not particularly." Fifteen year olds are volatile and emotional and alien to him in more ways than one. Once it would have bothered him, *really* bothered him, but Percy finds if he does not think on it too much, he forgets that his classmates are even there.

Snape smiles nastily. "Given that you have no adolescent drama to distract you from our lessons, I have decided to up the ante, as it were."

"Are you going to give me essays to mark, sir?" Percy asks innocently. Henry, when he asked for more advanced work during one of the group sessions, was promptly relegated to marking the first year essays and has been complaining about it for weeks.

Snape's lips twitch and he looks rather pleased with himself. "Alas, that task is unfortunately taken by several students dimmer than you, if we can believe such a thing exists. No, the task I have in mind for you is more—hands on, shall we say."

Percy can hardly hide his excitement, forgetting about Landon's ire in an instant. Finally he is being recognised for the hours of work he's poured into his Potions tutorials. Snape no longer rips him to pieces and instead seems to enjoy the casual bantering that Percy excels in.

"You once brought me a recipe for a portrait, although my sources tell me you've stopped attending the silly little club," Snape says silkily. "I feel as though it is time that we revisit that charade."

"I paint on my own, sir," Percy says, though he thinks guiltily that he has not painted anything for months on end. He's worried about what he will paint if he does.

"Doubtful, but I hardly care. We are to begin working with some of the ingredients used in the potion you provided me. Be warned, Mr. Weasley: many of them are explosive, and I shall not be providing any healing salve."

“Are we—harvesting, sir?” Percy wrinkles his nose. That had not been what he had envisioned.

Snape looks happy, and Percy’s stomach stinks. Ingredients collection is not the type of activity in which Percy excels. He much prefers intellectual exercises to the physical. “Oh, yes,” he says. “We begin next week.”

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Percy returns to painting, feeling a bit chastised. Given that his meagre social life has disappeared completely—and that Mimsy and Myrtle are taking care of adding to the Map—he actually has a bit of free time for once.

(Percy is also able, for once, to banish his inner voice from his head that snidely points out every time Percy is not actively working on defeating the Dark Lord. He doesn’t think too much about *why*).

He is working on a large oil portrait of his father—an acceptable thing to paint, by any metric—that wins him a fair amount of acclaim from the other members. Professor McGonagall comes to see it one day as he does the finishing touches and stands by it for a long time quietly.

“It will be nice to have a portrait artist in Britain again,” she says, when the silence begins to fray.

Percy looks up in surprise. “Oh, I’m not sure if I’ll be a portrait artist,” he says hastily, and then tries for a joke. “I’m hoping to be an Animagus first.”

This startles a laugh out of her. “We’ll get you to transform yet, Mr. Weasley. I don’t doubt you at all.”

Percy returns to his portrait feeling very warm.

Portraiture is actually very interesting. If he actually is to animate a portrait with the soul—or sliver of a soul, he supposes—of a subject, he will need to obtain a magical brush with a wand core, enchant his own set of paints, and seek out a *representative sample* of the subject. It still baffles him that the process can be so Dark, yet so common. Hypocrites.

Now that the sting of Snape’s rebuke has worn off and Percy has become proficient in purification rituals, Percy returns to reading about Dark magic, specifically the magic wrought with souls and blood. Certain spells seem to be dangerous, particularly offensive spells. But rituals and potions and enchantments and wards, on the other hand, appear to perform their intended purpose and be done. Percy’s theory is that Dark magic that relies on the soul or the magic or the blood of another are sated, whereas spells anchored by the caster and nothing else hunger for more.

He practices another Dark ritual in his room during one of the Quidditch matches, away from Myrtle or his roommates' prying eyes. This one is simple, and far less harmful; it will merely warn him if someone is speaking about him too often.

The process is solemn, and he feels chills run up his spine, as he does when he reads a very old text or hears certain songs. It is the feeling of tapping into tradition that stretches back to Merlin and Morgana, when magic was wild and fey and had a mind of its own. It evokes warlocks and casting circles, purification rites and scrying. As he chants softly in the light of a small, pungent candle, dripping blood deliberately into a copper bowl, tracing runes in the air with his wand, he feels connected to his pureblood heritage in a way that Weasleys rarely experience.

The mixture in the bowl hisses and spits, but as he adds the last of his blood it quells. This further lends credence to his hypothesis that these rituals need a sufficient offering and then are placated. Using a brush of thestral's hair, purchased surreptitiously over the holiday break, he paints the mixture onto his left forearm and then breathes the final words onto the glistening runes. They glow amber and then disappear.

Why is this Dark? Is it because he is using blood? The Wizarding World is so *backwards* sometimes, and it drives him insane. There is nothing inherently wrong with many of these rituals, and inside him that realisation hisses and then settles like the blood in his bowl.

***

March 1992

Dear Percival,

All four paws? Solid progress, mate! Paws must be easier than wings, though. Do you sit on your bed with your feet and hands as paws? Does it feel weird?

Still a little sad you won't be a bird. We all know Charlie will inevitably be the first dragon Animagus, and we'll leave you in the dust, yapping away on the ground. Tough luck.

Anyway, Moody is INTENSE. Begun to see conspiracies everywhere. Constant vigilance! Makes me distrust even you. Hey, you aren't hiding some big secret from me, are you? You are a rather evasive boy. Moody says he's tired of me and I'm a hopeless failure, but I know that's just how he shows affection. I just have to filter everything he says through an advanced translation. I imagine that's what you're like with Snape. I can't believe he takes you on harvesting dates in the middle of the night. Under the full moon, no less. Romantic. Hope no werewolves ruin the mood.

How's your OWL year going? I'm surprised you haven't had a mental breakdown yet. Charlie makes it sound like you're liable to snap at a single exam or something.

How's Myrtle? I still can't believe you befriended a ghost. Your yearmates are still upset at you? Just apologise to Landon. Trust me, he's waiting for a formal apology. He probably enlisted the Steelfellow heir to speak to you as an acceptable in-between. Do you not know the apologies? You can ask my mum for advice, she knows all the pureblood rituals.

Ok, have to dash. Don't keep fighting with your mates, Hogwarts should be a fun time.

Cheers,

Tonks

***

Percy finds to his surprise that he misses Landon more than he thought he would. Particularly now that the other boy is fifteen, rather than twelve, Landon's good humour and wit are not… unenjoyable for Percy to experience. He'd waited for Landon to forgive him, but when March twists its chilly way around the corner and Landon *still* is ignoring him in class, Percy gathers his courage and goes to formally apologise.

The other boy gives him a disdainful glance but warms slightly when Percy bows at the waist. Madam Tonks was very helpful in describing the best apology he should use. Aunt Muriel less so, as she insisted on knowing the details of the fight and then decisively told Percy not to apologise to a Greengrass.

"My apologies for my slight," Percy says, very formally. "I wish to extend my wand and upon my honour request your presence at the naming of my error."

Landon looks at him coolly. Percy is once again aware that the fifteen year old boy in front of him is set to inherit a standing that the Weasleys can only dream of attaining. "I accept your request," he says finally, and the imperious gesture of his hand is impossibly graceful. Percy burns with admiration for the way that a boy half his age is able to command such presence.

He straightens from his bow but does not sit. Neither does Landon stand. Percy knows what this means: his apology had better be good.

"I struggle with the lowering of my family," he says honestly. He's rewarded by the widening of Landon's eyes. "My Aunt Muriel is training me to be an heir of the Prewett legacy, but my training has been late and scattered. I am aware primarily of what privileges I lack, monetarily, socially, and intellectually. I at times keep myself distant from those I feel would disdain me. I felt as though your invitation was a slight, not a compliment. For that I apologise. I should have remembered that you are a friend to me and not a foe."

Not quite spoken in the ancient ways, but Percy wants to be honest, at least when he can. He can admit to himself these days that he is jealous of his peers, that he longs for a heritage

more glittering than the Weasley line. It does not cost him as much to admit this to Landon as it would have in his previous life.

"Your training is incomplete, which explains many things," Landon says, matching his formal cadence while also discarding the traditional words. "I was not made aware of your new status. I invited you as a friend, and not according to your standing as the heir presumptive. For that I too extend my wand in apology to match your own."

Another pause. Then, Landon grins and the spell of the earlier moment is broken. "You *twat*," Landon says, motioning Percy to sit. "Why didn't you tell me what you were really feeling?"

Percy shrugs and settles delicately into the chair opposite Landon. "I suppose I was too embarrassed," he says, a tad uncomfortable. "You and Henry and all the rest—you've been training to uphold these legacies your entire life. All I've got is two weeks a year with an ancient aunt against the wishes of my parents."

Landon looks mischievous. "I hereby invite you to spend a week under the Greengrass roof, to amend for your slight and so I may present you to my family," he intones with a slight incline of his head. "You can't deny that, it'd be rude. There, we've increased your training time by fifty percent. Not bad for one apology."

Percy looks down, trying to hide how much that means to him. He's not particularly close to Landon, but by the same token he's one of the closest friends he's ever had in either timeline, Penelope notwithstanding

"Thank you," he says and tries to impress how grateful he is.

With Landon and Henry speaking to him again, he finds his free time more limited. As a result, he spends most of his nights forgoing sleep to work on his other projects. His Animagus form is progressing slowly but steadily; his Patronus fails to materialise; his Occlumency improves; and he finds a few Light rituals that could be promising to aid in Horcrux destruction.

He also decides to check in on the Stone.

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Ron, Harry, and Hermione look at him with matching looks of mistrust.

Percy smiles winningly. He's made an effort to spend more time with the tiny Trio in an attempt to ingratiate himself with him, occasionally dropping in at meals or proofreading Ron's truly horrific essays. (He is grateful for many reasons that Ron did not end up in Ravenclaw). Nevertheless they display early signs of the clannish devotion that later characterise their friendship, refusing to socialise with their peers or confide in an elder sibling.

Percy wants to know *why* they wait until the end of the year to go after the Stone. They must know it's there by now; with the clue of Nicholas Flamel, likely planted by Dumbledore, the Stone is an obvious leap. Do they learn of Quirrel's treachery? Is Harry kidnapped and Ron and Hermione attempted rescuers? Does Dumbledore lure them in?

"It was for an extra credit assignment I was completing," Hermione lies somewhat credibly.

He raises an eyebrow at her. "And you asked these two for help?"

She sniffs. It's a sound she never fully grows into. "I thought it might interest them in their schoolwork."

He focuses his attention on Ron next, as the weak link. "What did you learn about Flamel, then?"

Ron, interestingly, looks to Harry and not to Hermione before answering. Harry gives a short shake of his head, his hair falling over his scar into his eyes. "Dunno," Ron says shiftily. "Made lots of gold."

"And you?"

Harry squints and eyes Percy. His skeptical expression is out of place on a face so young. The Chosen One is still the smallest boy in his year, and Percy cannot imagine him facing Riddle's shade in just a few months.

"He lives forever," is Harry's contribution. He hesitates but tries to smoothly say, "He has a Stone. Seems pretty magical."

Percy is beginning to have a headache. "And how are your professors? Clearly you lot are doing well in your classes, if you're completing extra work."

"Why do you even care?" Ron grumbles.

"Ronnie, lad, Percy always cares about his wee siblings," Fred interjects mockingly. Percy stiffens. How long had the twins been there? Not for the first time, Percy curses sharing a tower with so many of his siblings.

George nods solemnly from where he'd appeared at Percy's elbow. "He writes long letters to Mum, updating her on our progress."

"George did not complete his essay adequately," Fred begins, mimicking Percy in a high and unflattering tone.

"Fred is having trouble in Potions," George continues, his own voice ingratiating.

"Ronald won't eat his vegetables—"

Percy breaks in finally. "Will you two *knock it off*? I only write to Mum because neither of you can be bothered to let her know how you're doing, and I won't apologise for it."

Harry and Hermione, both only children, shift as they witness the brothers squabble. Percy senses him losing his opportunity to wheedle information from them and tries to pick an easy topic that will send away the twins. "Fred, I hear from Professor Snape that you're improving in Potions."

Ron groans. "You talk to *Snape* about us?"

Fred sniggers. "Percy loves Snape. Always taking *private lessons* from him. He'll probably propose marriage at the end of his NEWTs."

Hermione looks aghast, but not at the concept of Percy marrying Snape, which is certainly the cause of the matching grimaces on Harry and Ron's faces. "You can take private lessons?"

Had she not known? Percy files this away for later perusal, watching Harry give Ron a deeply meaningful look.

"Professor Snape doesn't particularly like any of us, but he tolerates me as long as I do good work," Percy continues. "He seems to enjoy insulting all of you in front of me."

"He's watching us!" Harry can't hold in his outburst any longer. He turns triumphantly to Hermione. "He's *spying* on us!"

Poor Harry, doomed to always be right in the end.

Fred and George snicker and begin to tease Ron about Snape watching him in his sleep ("Do you think he knows Ron still has a stuffed bear?" "Do you think he knows Ron wishes it was a stuffed spider?") while Percy muses over Harry's outburst.

They suspect Snape?

"And what of Quirrell?" Percy breaks in, keeping one eye on whether Ron is liable to turn to tears over the twins' teasing. "How is he?"

"Useless," Fred snorts. "Not even a vampire. Did you see the snowballs? Wicked, right?"

"My idea," George chimes in proudly.

Percy has to fight to keep a look of horror off his face when he realises his twin brothers enchanted snowballs to bounce off the face of the Dark Lord. Merlin, it's a wonder he didn't immediately call for the swift execution of all Weasleys. Did he not remember?

(Did he…not remember?)

"Oy, we like Quirrell," Ron says, oddly loyal. Percy narrows his eyes at his youngest brother.

Hermione nods fiercely. "He's really quite overlooked because of his stutter."

"Snape should lay off him," Harry mutters quietly.

Oh, so they think it's Snape pressuring Quirrell. Why? Snape must give them cause to believe he's after the Stone, which means either that Snape is going to make a stand for it soon, or Quirrell is.

Either way, Percy is going to get there first.

***

April 1992

“As this is your OWL year, I would expect several of you to, for the first time in your miserable existence, feel the need to study independently outside of class,” Snape greets them one foggy Friday near the beginning of April. He begins passing back their latest papers, hovering over each student threateningly. “These pathetic efforts, however, have conclusively disabused me of that notion. Does anybody care to venture a guess why?”

Nobody moves. The fifth year Ravenclaws have this class with the Gryffindors, and neither party is fool enough to risk answering a question that is clearly a trap.

“Analysing the Strengthening Solution,” Snape continues nastily as he stalks around the classroom. “Is *well* within the grasp of the average fifth year student that possesses some iota of intelligence, and yet you all persist in proving that you barely share a brain between you.”

Percy snorts. He can’t help himself, even as a shocked gasp travels through the room. Snape can be terrifying, but this casual malice is not particularly frightening. If anything, it is rather amusing, particularly since Percy does not entirely disagree. His classmates would be able to complete the assignments if they merely spent their free time studying instead of snogging in corridors. Percy had twice seen Alexander wrapped around a sixth year Hufflepuff in an alcove near Myrtle’s bathroom. Both times he’d hastily averted his eyes and walked by quickly, but he couldn't shake the thought that Alexander had deliberately planted himself in his path just to show off.

“Something amusing you, Mr. Weasley?”

“No, sir,” Percy says, his lips still twitching despite himself.

“Five points from Gryffindor,” Snape says, dropping his paper in front of him. Percy’s peers scowl at his back and he tries to adopt his facial expression into something more appropriate.

“Yes, sir.”

The lesson proceeds as it does normally, except for that on Percy's exam paper, spiky handwriting instructs him to be at the Great Hall at 10 PM.

***

He dresses warmly, warding his clothing against water and tears. For all of Snape's gleeful premonitions that Percy will poison himself during a harvesting session, the man has been restricting Percy to gathering plants by the edge of the Forbidden Forest on the occasional Sunday afternoon. This, however, is different.

Snape meets him outside the Great Hall wearing dark pants and a dark sweater. Percy gapes a bit at seeing him out of his customary robes and sheepishly shrugs his own off when Snape acridly wonders aloud if Percy desires a creature to snag him by the train of his robes.

"I suppose you thought you had no need of dragonhide gloves," Snape says with a derisive glance at Percy's bare hands. "One wonders where this notion of invincibility arises."

Percy glares a little. "I don't have dragonhide gloves, Professor." The *I can't afford them* goes unsaid.

Snape hands over a sleek pair. "Return these at the conclusion of each meeting and procure your own by the beginning of the next term if you wish to continue subjecting me to your presence," he says before turning on his heel. Percy shrinks his robes to stuff in his trouser pocket, relieved he wore a warm sweater, and hurries after his professor.

They make their silent way into the Forest. This is the first time Percy has been in here at night, and he finds it dark and unsettling. He sticks close to Snape, who gives him a mocking glance but allows him to trail at his heels.

The moon shines round and full overhead. Percy listens carefully for the howl of the wolf but hears nothing.

They stop at the base of a large and ancient tree. Percy recognises the silvery green plant twined around its base: moonvines, used for protection. Incredibly powerful and more than a little risky due to their volatile nature.

"Professor," he says slowly. "What exactly do you anticipate needing these for?"

Snape's lips press into a thin smile. "There are monsters about," he says quietly. "I find it best to be prepared for all manner of them."

Percy meets his eyes and thinks of a dark shadow twisting out of a rich, purple turban.

"Who protects Hogwarts, Professor? Or should I say—what?" Percy asks as he bends to harvest the hissing vines. No wonder Snape lent him dragonhide gloves; the vines are liable to snap and lunge, and their venom is poisonous until it is twice-boiled in an infusion with faerie clover.

"An interesting question," Snape says approvingly. "The Headmaster, of course, has his own set of wards and protections. The castle has her own as well. Each professor is called upon to add to those protections."

"Are they tied in any way to the portraits of the old Headmasters?"

He feels, rather than sees, Snape's evaluative glance. "Astute," the man drawls. "I am surprised to see a modicum of intelligent reasoning in you. Yes, Weasley, that is one reason why each Headmaster is preserved in memorium. How are your studies into portraiture going?"

"Poorly," Percy admits, sucking air through his teeth when a vine wraps tightly around one of his fingers. He quietly incants the sun-daze spell and watches it creep into the shade of his hand. "It's interesting, really. A portrait can only be made of somebody while they're alive, or recently dead. It seems as though you need—a part of them, a representative matter, to somehow imbue the portrait with their—"

He stops, not wanting to say it in front of Snape and risk his derision.

"Their soul," Snape completes. "Indeed. If you are truly serious about completing the portraiture potion, I expect you to take it seriously. It may take the reminder of your time here at Hogwarts to complete."

Percy jerks up his head and stares at his professor with surprise. "Why?"

"I am bored," Snape says languidly and, likely, evasively. "I have never dabbled in portraiture, and I expect to receive a fair amount of amusement from your varied failures."

Once again, the wish to confide in Snape rises inside Percy and he must tamper it down forcefully. The only effective way to keep a secret is not to tell *anyone*.

"I will do my best to provide said amusement," he says again, and focuses again on his task. "Professor?" When Snape does not respond, Percy ventures again, "Do you think Hogwarts is...safe?"

"Focus, boy," says Snape instead of responding, flicking his wand to singe a vine hopefully targeting the soft underside of Percy's left wrist. "What do you mean by 'safe'?"

"Safe from harm. From enemies. Dark Wizards."

Snape looks rather like how Percy imagines a vampire would look, his pale skin illuminated by the soft moonlight and the wind whistling through his dark hair. "Have you reason to doubt the efficacy of the castle's defences?"

Percy does not speak the truth. "Professor Quirrell has much to say about the dangers he encountered during his travels," he says instead, innocently. "Particularly as my tenure at Hogwarts winds down, it makes me contemplate what else I may encounter, when I am *less* protected than I may be here."

Snape rolls his eyes. "You would do best not to listen to frightening stories before bed, lest they give you nightmares you cannot wake from," the older man says dryly. "I assure you that there is no living wizard that can match the Headmaster for magical ability. You will be safe here, and when you graduate into your small and insipid little life, you will be safe there too."

Percy thinks of the Ministry, and of a Dark Lord stalking through the halls, and has to bite down on his lower lip before he says something contradictory to both statements that he will later regret.

***

May 1992

Charlie and Percy get a drink in Hogsmeade the night that Charlie comes to rescue a dragon. Charlie looks well: bronzed and healthy, glowing with months of sunlight and heavy manual labour. His friends look the same, masculine in a way that Percy can only cautiously admire from afar. In contrast to Bill, Charlie is clearly not their leader, but he just as clearly has their respect, and Percy watches curiously as they tease and jostle Charlie, who teases and jostles them right back. They accept Percy without question into the amorphous mass that walks cheerfully down the dark streets of Hogsmeade, and Percy for once does not feel aware of the way his glasses sit on his nose, and the slight hunch to his posture that he knows he overcompensates for, and the smattering of spots that mar his nose.

“You’ve changed, Perce.” Charlie flicks his gaze up and down Percy’s tall and slim frame. “You never would have snuck out to meet me before.”

Despite Percy’s general disregard for the rules in this timeline, he feels as though still must defend them. He is twenty-eight, a veritable old man by any metric. His peers cannot say the same and therefore must obey the rules. “Rules exist for a reason, Charlie. I am not ashamed to follow them.”

“And yet here you are,” Charlie says, waving his hand around the Hog’s Head. The grizzled bartender had given Percy an evaluative glower, but given that Percy does not quite trust the effects of alcohol on his young body, had not had any cause to question him for the sparkling water he had ordered. “How did you get here, anyway?”

Percy cannot help but smirk. “A secret passage.”

“And you say you haven’t changed!” Charlie’s obvious glee at this bit of rule-breaking makes Percy feel somewhat smug. “Proud of you, Perce. So: OWL year, huh? Surprised you’re not driving us all mad.”

What can he say, he’s long surpassed the Hogwarts curriculum? Only in his private lessons with Snape and McGonagall does he feel like he is even remotely challenged. He will get all O’s on his OWLs, like he did the first time, and like he would in every timeline. Percy merely explains, as he did in the first timeline to everyone that would listen. “Exams do not need to be stressful. With adequate preparation, all material can be mastered. Exams do not exist to trick the student, merely to provide him with an opportunity to prove what he knows.”

“Spoken like a true swot,” Charlie says. Since it’s affectionately given, Percy does not take offence. “Any girls? Er, boys?”

Percy lets his general disdain answer that question silently.

“Right, of course. Nobody on my end either, if you were so curious. How’s Ron? Friends with the Boy-Who-Lived, I hear.”

If only Charlie knew how close Ron would become to the Boy-Who-Lived. “He’s convinced Snape is evil, he’s frustrated that Hermione Granger believes house elves are slave labor, and he’s illegally smuggling a dragon out of the school, so a normal first year, really.”

Charlie laughs and checks his watch. Downing the rest of his pint, he motions to his friends at the next booth. “Want to come? You can be our cover, just a good Prefect shepherding his younger brother’s friends to bed.”

“Not a Prefect,” Percy reluctantly admits as they head back to the castle.

“Not a Prefect! Is McGonagall mad? You were made to be a Prefect.”

Percy smiles uncomfortably. “She thinks I am not *integrating* with my peers.”

Charlie rolls his eyes and pulls his broom out of his pack, unshrinking it fluidly. “Her loss. Odd, though. I hear McGonagall raves about you. Mum’s very proud of her young Animagus. Hop on, Perce.”

“I don’t fly,” Percy states definitively.

“It’ll be over before you know it. Come on, don’t be a wuss.”

Percy very gingerly climbs on. If he spends the entire ride to the Astronomy Tower clutching Charlie very tightly, his brother is kind enough not to mention it.

***

One interesting by-product of the visit is that Harry, in his adolescent fear, leaves the invisibility cloak crumpled by the edge of the Tower. Percy pauses to pick it up—do no young boys learn to keep their things neatly?—and therefore is unable to stop Harry and Hermione from running straight into a very unamused McGonagall. He is not above using it to avoid detection himself and whispers a silent apology to young Harry, who will not have a very pleasant morning.

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The cloak is like nothing Percy has ever seen before. It shimmers when it is folded on his bed but becomes entirely invisible when worn, almost as if it senses when it is around a person. He tests it on several items in his dorm and concludes that while it can mask other objects, it only becomes a true cloak of invisibility when worn.

With a pop, Mimsy appears next to him. Myrtle is not far behind. Percy curses and only manages not to fall off his bed through sheer reflex.

"What are you *doing?* " Percy hisses. Luckily his hangings were drawn and his protective spells activated. His roommates would hopefully not notice the intruders.

Myrtle pouts at him. "I cannot believe you thought a *house elf* could do this better than me."

"You cannot carry objects through walls, Myrtle, we've discussed this at length," Percy snaps back. "Don't be a child." When she threatens to sniffle, he points a threatening finger at her. "If you dare drench my bed, I will not show you the new Map."

This forestalls her tears and she settles down mutinously. Percy turns to Mimsy, waiting patiently for her turn.

"Master Percy, sir, Mimsy has finished the task," she says breathlessly.

He frowns at her, holding a slim hand out for the Map. She produces it obediently. "I thought you were efficient, Mimsy. It's been ages."

"Hogwarts is a very big castle, sir," Mimsy says obstinately before catching herself. "But Mimsy punishes himself, sir, right away, Mimsy slams her head into the bedpost—"

"Absolutely not," he says, alarmed. Between Mimsy threatening to enact bodily harm on his bed and Myrtle liable to flood the room, he'll be lucky if he escapes this interaction unscathed. "I forbid it. Let me see the Map. You kept it a secret?"

"Yes, sir, Mimsy is very discreet, sir."

As he unfolds the Map, Percy has to concede that Mimsy is right: Hogwarts is a *very* big castle. There are all sorts of rooms that the original Marauders missed. In fact, he deduces as he peers closer at it, many of the rooms overlap each other in some feat of folded wizardspace. Percy is not particularly interested in magical construction, despite his studying in that corner of the library for over a decade, but he is impressed by the complexity of the Hogwarts castle.

Myrtle floats nearer to him. "Wow, Mims, you did a fine job," she says enthusiastically, earlier grudge forgotten. "There are *so many rooms,* Percy! We'll never find anything at this rate."

"Master Percy and Miss Ghost loses something?" Mimsy chimes in. She too crowds around him until she can see the Map. "Master and Miss should try the Room of Hidden Things. All

lost things end up in the Room of Hidden Things. Master Percy walks three times and thinks of what yous need." She points at it with a long, crooked finger.

He exchanges an excited look with Myrtle. Seventh floor, not a floor he explored very thoroughly. "We'll take a look, Mimsy. I'll call on you if I have any other tasks."

"Please Master Percy call Mimsy," she says, sweeping a low curtsy. He eyes her but she manages to stay balanced, even as she wobbles on the uneven surface of his bed. "Mimsy enjoys having the extra work."

He flaps a hand at Myrtle too after Mimsy pops away. "Begone, Miss Ghost. I've studying to do."

Myrtle giggles and dives through his bed into the floor, leaving a lingering chill behind.

Percy murmurs the locating charm over the Map, eager to see if his modifications are still active after the expansions. Snape is in his office, McGonagall in her chambers, and Quirrell is in the Forbidden Forest, which normally is no cause for alarm. However, Percy looks in alarm as two dots grow ever nearer: *Harry Potter* and *Draco Malfoy*.

And Harry doesn't have the cloak.

Swearing, Percy gathers up his things and pulls the cloak over himself with only the briefest of hesitations. It is rather unlike him to go charging into danger, but he can't let Harry get killed. It is very possible in the first timeline Harry had the cloak and hid from Quirrell until the danger passed.

But no, Percy had needed to *study* the damn thing, and he might have just damned the whole world as a result.

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He finds the children easily, aided in equal parts by the Map, a Point-Me spell, and their loud, childish bickering.

He finds Quirrell too, and stands absolutely still beneath the cloak until the possessed man stumbles past. Despite himself, Percy shivers. This is the closest he's ever been to the Dark Lord. Harry's cloak must be made of strong family magic, for Quirrell does not even hesitate as he brushes past Percy.

Riddle doesn't seem to be tracking Harry, however; he seems intent on following a trail invisible to Percy. Keeping several measured paces behind, Percy follows quietly, wand out.

Quirrell's movements are jerky, nothing like the grace Percy always imagined would characterise Riddle. Perhaps the man is fighting the possession? Nevertheless, Riddle succeeds in forcing Quirrell on until the object of his hunt is apparent.

A young unicorn foal scratches at a tree root, the tension in her body belied by the taut muscles in her legs. She knows something is wrong in the forest, and Percy does too, a question he'd been wondering suddenly answered.

Riddle has been living a half life artificially extended, sustained on the blood of the purest creature known to their world.

It sickens him, as it would sicken any wizard, the idea so antithetical to his way of life that he would not be more disgusted to see Riddle eat a young boy with his bare hands. He doesn't move as Riddle traps the unicorn with a whispered spell, doesn't move as the horrid spectre bends over his prize, doesn't move until he hears Malfoy and Harry's youthful voices stop abruptly.

Acting from instinct, he turns and casts the strongest protection spell he knows over the two boys, the silver of the shield fading just as Riddle looks up and locks eyes with his enemy.

Harry shouts and clasps a hand to his forehead, and even in his shock Percy takes a heartbeat to note that reaction. Why—?

—But then there's a centaur, of all things, braying at the Dark Lord, and Quirrell flees with blood still staining his mouth, and Percy is suddenly alone to watch the unicorn die.

"I'm sorry," he says into the silence, still under the Cloak. "I am going to beat him, you know."

The unicorn gives no indication that she's heard. Percy knows he ought to leave her be, but he cannot bring himself to move, and so boy and unicorn stand together in the cold, whistling wind, both left behind by the Dark Lord, one dying, and one with a face wet with tears.

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He doesn't take the Cloak off until he's back in his room, his hands shaking. He'll return it tomorrow, as soon as he can sneak into their dormitory.

Tom Riddle is obsessed with immortality to the point where he will murder a unicorn to get it.

But what does that do to his soul—!

One thing is clear: this *shade* absolutely cannot be allowed to gain possession of the Stone.

***

Percy stations Myrtle to watch the underground room, to inform him of any changes. She reports that Dumbledore has moved a giant mirror into the room but aside from that it remains untouched.

***

Percy and Myrtle choose the next Hogsmeade weekend as the best time to try for the Room of Hidden Things. Percy makes his excuse to his peers, who are still frosty with him due to Henry's continued disappointment—it still baffles Percy that *Henry* would care so deeply for *Landon* when they are not even in the same House nor on the same side of Wizarding Society—and so he is left in peace with hardly a protest.

They meet in front of the spot that Mimsy pointed out on the map, across from a very upsetting tapestry involving dancing trolls performing unspeakable acts. It sends Myrtle into a fit of giggles and Percy turns and glares sternly at her.

Her presence here is highly conditional, allowed primarily due to her strong performance during their last adventure (and perhaps his growing fondness for the ghost, and his desire for company, though he was loath to admit it). She obediently straightens and zips her lips, though she cannot resist a pirouette when Percy turns back to the blank wall.

Percy ignores her and thinks instead of Mimsy's instructions. *I need the Room of Hidden Things*, he thinks clearly to himself as he walks back and forth.

Lo and behold, a door.

Percy is just thinking of how easy it all is after several years of hunting when he opens the door and sees what all has been lost inside Hogwarts.

Everything, apparently.

There are long and winding rows of junk, stretching as far as the eye can see in every direction. Percy and Myrtle silently cross the threshold and close the door, struck dumb by the sheer volume of *things*. Quidditch equipment and statues and textbooks and quills, robes and cauldrons and desks and hats. Even a large brass tuba from an earlier time hangs precariously from what appears to be a coat rack.

"Merlin's balls," Myrtle breathes appreciatively. "Think this is where Vanished objects go?"

"Must be," Percy responds, still dazed.

The opportunistic part of his mind starts ticking. He's here for the diadem, of course, but there is so much in here that there's got to be something useful. That solid lead cauldron to his left, for instance, would be a good addition to his stores.

"We are going to index it," he announces, pulling out his wand. "Tag anything useful."

"Useful for what?"

Percy smiles grimly. "Pretend you are fighting a war," he says, "and we'll go from there."

She gives him a ghostly look. "One day you're going to tell me what you're hiding from me," she says, trailing cold fingers across his shoulder. "I'm very good at secrets, you know. I'd never tell."

"Unless a handsome boy smiled at you," Percy retorts, turning to his left. "I'll take this direction, meet in half an hour."

Myrtle giggles delightedly. "You're a handsome boy too, Percy Weasley, and I don't tell you all of my secrets."

"I didn't know you had secrets that don't involve me."

Myrtle preens. It's an odd sight for a ghost, but Percy is used to it. "I have fifty years of secrets," she reveals. "*Everyone* likes to cry to dear old Myrtle."

"One day," Percy says, waving her off. "We'll exchange our most terrible secrets. Now, let's go. We need to focus. Remember the location of anything useful and I'll come and tag it with my wand."

He sets off down his chosen path. Suddenly alone in the cavernous depths of the Room of Hidden Things, he feels a faint chill. He checks the Map, but the complex layering of runes that allows the magic to fill and document the space around it does not seem to work in the Room. Perhaps an area of folded wizard space? He adds it to his ever growing list of things to research.

He really needs a Time Turner.

Without the aid of the Map, Percy makes do with frequent revealing charms, searching for dangerous curses or wards or animals. Some of the objects appear to be heavily cursed; one menacing statue of a warthog alights with a veritable rainbow of warnings when he casts a diagnostic charm at it. He backs away slowly and goes toward the safer pile of discarded robes.

He tags several things of interest, though he dare not touch them without further study: a pair of duelling arm bands, meant to help channel wandless magic; a few old books from the days when Hogwarts was less concerned about the corruption of young minds; vials and bottles that could possibly hold something useful or interesting; and a great big leather trunk that, from his initial examination, seems to contain multiple compartments.

He wonders about the students—professors?—that came before him. Why would they discard some of these things, many of which seem perfectly usable and possibly valuable? Or was it as Myrtle suggested: through some twist of magic, this was where lost or even vanished items ended up? (Not magically Vanished, of course, Percy knows the theory. But perhaps this is Hogwarts' large lost and found?)

Or perhaps they, like he, needed a base of operations, somewhere to hide his work from the prying eyes of professors and peers. Perhaps they, like the previous he, did not find solace in a cold bathroom with a weepy ghost. Perhaps for all the years Hogwarts was a haven for students, those students had secrets and ambitions and the need for refuge.

***

Percy briefly debates asking Mimsy to pop him into the last room of Dumbledore's game, as he's begun to call it in his head, but he disregards the idea. As much as Mimsy enjoys the odd task that Percy has for her, she's loyal to the school. Percy is careful to use her only for things he can explain as the activities of a precocious yet paranoid student, such as helping him with the Map. Furthermore, he figures he may as well see if Dumbledore added any additional challenges.

They go easier the second time: music, fire, *Immobulus*, checkmate, and a nifty hex meant to fell a rampaging elephant. (Thank goodness for Sonali Agarwal, Landon's current love interest, and her knowledge. He really must expand his lexicon beyond the English canon).

He drinks the correct potion after scanning the riddle again and then steps into the final room.

The Mirror of Erised greets him.

So does one Severus Snape.

Percy's wand is already out, but he finds himself disarmed before he can process that the shadowy figure in front of the Mirror is his Potions professor.

Snape actually laughs, a dry chuckle that makes Percy sweat nervously. "I admit I am unsurprised to see you here," Snape says, levelling his wand at Percy. "I should have warned you away when I caught you at the trapdoor."

"I just wanted to see what was here," Percy lies, trying to sound embarrassed. "I figured a trapdoor must be hiding something."

"Do not lie to me," Snape says lazily, wand still trained on Percy. "I set a ward at the entrance, and it took you under an hour to reach this chamber. You have been here before."

Percy thinks quickly. Behind Snape, the mirror gleams, and he latches onto the idea gratefully. "I wanted to see the Mirror of Erised," he says, trying to sound longing, as if so enthralled by the mirror that he would risk detection just to see it.

"By all means, take a look at whatever insipid dream you imagine is your desire," Snape says magnanimously, motioning with his wand.

Percy steps up nervously but avoids looking directly in the mirror. There could be a trap embedded in the glass, now that the mirror is part of Dumbledore's game. “I'd rather not,

Professor. It has occurred to me that the mirror may be dangerous. I suppose it's good that you caught me here."

"I assure you, it is perfectly safe," Snape says, visibly amused at Percy's flimsy attempts to avoid looking into the mirror in front of him. "The Headmaster told me himself."

"The Headmaster has a unique idea of what 'safe' means."

Snape raises an eyebrow. "*Only those who seek to do no harm with it may be assured of it*, were his exact words. We are going to discuss precisely why it is that you feel so *unsafe* in Hogwarts, Weasley."

Percy narrows his eyes, tuning out the latter half of Snape's silky sentence. An odd thing for the Headmaster to say, really. How can one seek to do harm with the Mirror of Erised? It is unlikely that Quirrell knows it is here, given that Percy is relatively sure that Quirrell hasn't made his way through the traps yet.

Snape snaps at him, his tone curt. "Go on then, Weasley. You made your way down to the depths of this little secret. Go on and seek your reward. It shan't hurt you."

Those who seek to do no harm with it may be assured of it. Harm with the mirror? Be assured of the mirror? Be assured of harm? It's not very grammatical. Percy bites his lip as he thinks over the words.

"Don't tell me you're suddenly *shy*," says Snape in some disgust. "Fine. We will leave here, and you will never nose into matters that do not concern you again, do you understand?"

When he looks into the mirror, he sees his figure is very much the same, though with one notable exception: in his left hand, he triumphantly holds a striking red gem.

Those who seek to do no harm with it may be assured of it.

Dumbledore is speaking of the Philosopher's Stone, Percy realises in a dawning second, and drags his eyes up to meet his reflection's.

I will do no more harm, he promises, staring at his future self desperately. His eyes traverse over the image: Gryffindor's sword, Ravenclaw's diadem, Hufflepuff's cup, Slytherin's locket. This time instead of Unspeakable robes he wears the purple outfit of the Minister of Magic. Fred winks at him from the array of siblings arranged behind him, and Percy focused on his laughing face. *I will do no harm with it*, he wishes fiercely.

As Snape reaches out a hand to pull back Percy, Fred winks again and plucks the a red stone from Percy's hand, dropping it lithely in Percy's pocket. His robes tug away from it, and Percy inhales very sharply, trying desperately not to let any of his thoughts cross his face.

"Had your fill?" Snape drawls, pulling Percy's shoulder roughly. "Detention, every day next week, seven o'clock. Little boys shall learn not to investigate where they don't belong."

Percy does not respond, in the middle as he is in a prolonged panic attack.

He has the Philosopher's Stone.

He has the *fucking* Philosopher's Stone.

And you shall do no harm with it, he thinks to himself, like a vow.

"Why are you here, sir?" He gasps out in a desperate attempt to deflect attention.

Snape's glare is icy enough to freeze a summer day. "That is none of your business, Weasley."

"Why is any of this here? Why hide the Mirror?"

Snape turns suddenly and slams Percy against the rough stone wall. "I give you leeway, boy," he hisses, and his face is very close to Percy's own. "You amuse me—a Weasley heir who plays at Potions and dabbles in Dark Magic. Do not mistake my amusement for leniency. You are where you do not belong; you have no right to ask questions of me, nor of the Headmaster. I would inform him of your behaviour if he did not have more pressing things to attend to than a worm of a student wriggling into the dirt."

Percy nods rapidly. The Stone seems to burn a hole in his pocket. He resolutely focuses on his Occlumency shields and does not make eye contact.

"Detention, every day next week," Snape says again, releasing him. Percy nearly crumples from relief but catches himself in time. "I shall escort you out and you are *never* to speak to me with disrespect again."

Snape waves his wand without verbalising a spell and a small door appears in the corner of the room. It opens into the third floor corridor, somehow opposite the door leading to the trapdoor. Snape ushers him through at wandpoint.

"Do not return here," Snape says when they are through, towering over him. "There are dangers you cannot dream of, Weasley, in your insipid mind. Run back to your little lion's den and cease this pretence of independence."

"Yes, sir," Percy says obediently, and flees.

He has the *fucking Philosopher's Stone.*

***

Back in his dorm, he deposits the Stone inside the trunk he'd retrieved finally from the Room of Hidden Things. He wards it so fiercely that he wagers even Bill would struggle to break through the defences and then collapses on his bed.

Worry suddenly strikes. Can Dumbledore tell he has the Stone? Will he be able to tell that it's taken? What will Percy say? Will he be expelled?

A sick feeling in his stomach, Percy hurriedly fetches the Map. Snape, he notes, has disappeared: likely back into the final room. (Does he not know of the Stone? Perhaps he is waiting there to protect it from Quirrell.) Quirrell is in his chambers. (What does Quirrell do to sleep? Percy's mind is feverish and quick. Does Quirrell lay on his side? Does Riddle have a preferred side to sleep?) Dumbledore is—

Also not on the Map.

Percy worries his lower lip. Perhaps Dumbledore is inside with Snape. Maybe they already know he's the culprit. Oh, why did he think this was a good idea? He *knew* he couldn't mess with the timeline. It had all been out of his control!

Percy spends the rest of the night watching the Map. Dumbledore does not reappear. Neither does Snape.

***

Percy spends the last few weeks walking on eggshells, flinching at every loud noise. His detentions with Snape are surprisingly mundane; he scrubs cauldrons and debones sprite bugs. The man is clearly distracted, hardly even tormenting him during the evening's punishment. Percy watches him and comes to the conclusion that Snape must know Quirrell is going to make a stand.

His classmates tease him about finally succumbing to the pressure of the OWLs. Even Professor McGonagall lets up on his last few Animagus lessons before the summer, telling him to focus on his health and get some sun. Every time he sees Dumbledore at a meal, Percy chooses a seat that faces the opposite direction. He occludes so heavily that he sometimes feels as though his classmates are speaking to him from the other end of a very dark tunnel. Meanwhile, the Stone weighs on him.

What worries him is that he does not know what happens to the Stone in the original timeline. Does Dumbledore keep it, and use it at a critical juncture? Is it destroyed? Does Riddle keep it and use it to resurrect himself? Percy knows that Quirrell is vanquished, yet the shade of Tom Riddle remains.

But how could a shade handle the Stone, anyway? It's likely that it is destroyed in whatever battle occurs between Harry and Tom. Still, Percy cannot help but wonder.

He wars with himself about whether to return the Stone; presumably Harry discovers the same enchantment, and in whatever confrontation erupts between he and Quirrell, destroys the Stone. Will Percy need to destroy the Stone too?

That he does not know how to put the Stone back in the Mirror convinces him to stay put for now, though he increases his surveillance on the third floor corridor. He may need to step in and save Harry if his removal of the Stone has unintended consequences.

When he sees Harry, Ron, and Hermione sneak out toward the end of term, he follows. He quietly rennervates Longbottom, interrogates him, and hits him with a mild Confounding charm before slipping out after the trio. He stands outside the third floor corridor and debates with himself as they disappear inside.

Should he follow them? They survived the first time, but he may have already irrevocably changed the timeline. But will his Disillusionment charm hold up to the challenges? He has no way to explain to the three why he followed them. What if Dumbledore is there?

He decides cautiously to wait, though he’s prepared to follow if needed.

After nearly an hour and a half, Ron and Hermione stagger out. Percy has to stifle a gasp: Ron is very pale and his head has a crown of dried blood. He's leaning heavily on Hermione.

There's a clatter of discarded brooms. Percy twitches to help them but forces himself to stay still as they hobble past him. They seem worried but not in shock; Harry must still be alive. Is he battling Riddle?

Percy looks at the door again and imagines an eleven year old boy facing off against the broken soul of the Darkest wizard of their time, while he waits in the shadows.

It shames him.

And then Dumbledore is there, roaring a command that causes the other door to pop into being. He hurtles through it without even a glance at Percy, whose Disillusionment charm likely would not have held up to even a second of Dumbledore's full attention.

Percy takes that moment to flee. He goes straight to the Hospital Wing, where Madam Pomfrey is already healing Ron and tutting about midnight Quidditch dares. Percy makes up a story about finding Neville confused in the Common Room and she releases Ron into his care.

"We've got to go to the third floor," Ron says hoarsely, his face white.

Percy wonders for a second how scrawny Harry Potter won the undying loyalty of his brother in under nine months. By the end of Percy’s first year—both times—he’d barely made inroads with his classmates and still felt awkward deciding who to sit next to at meals. By the end of Ron’s first year, he’d found a friend he would risk death for, or maybe two, depending on how eleven year old Ron felt about eleven year old Hermione.

"What happened on the third floor?"

The whole story spills out in the corridor outside the Hospital Wing, and with it tears from both Ron and Hermione. Percy, after a furious internal debate, hugs them both gingerly and conjures them handkerchiefs.

"He Who Must Not Be Named?" Percy asks, feigning surprise. "The Philosopher's Stone? It can't be. Not at Hogwarts."

"It *is!"* Ron is frustrated enough to stamp his foot, reminding Percy suddenly of a young Ginny.

"Well, if Dumbledore says so," Percy says soothingly. He knows better than to criticise Dumbledore within earshot of anyone. "Harry will be fine, just you wait. Headmaster Dumbledore is the finest wizard of our time. No harm will come to either of you in Hogwarts, He Who Must Not Be Named or not."

"Well said," says Dumbledore, and Percy flinches. He has got to come up with a way to prevent people from sneaking up on him so easily. He smiles vaguely at Dumbledore and drops his eyes to the floor, but it seems to be an unnecessary precaution; Dumbledore does not even try to meet his eyes, nor pay him much attention. Cradled in his arms is Harry's small body, and all of his attention—and Ron's attention, and Hermione's, and even Percy's—is drawn instantly to the crumpled figure.

Harry looks improbably smaller when Dumbledore deposits him gently onto the nearest bed. Percy's heart leaps into his throat at the pale cast of Harry's face, but Madam Pomfrey takes possession over her patient with an efficient series of gestures.

"Magical exhaustion primarily," Dumbledore tells her. "Check for burns on his hands, and run diagnostics on his scar. I don't expect he shall wake tonight; I will return tomorrow." He gives a meaningful look to the hospital warden, who nods grimly back to him.

The elderly wizard claps his hands and turns to Ron and Hermione. "You have both been very brave," he says gravely, and the two children flush, tears forgotten. "You are a credit both to your House and to your friend."

For a wild second, Percy imagines Dumbledore telling *him* the same. And then he shakes his head. Percy does not feel any more comfortable around Dumbledore in this timeline than he did in the last; he does not feel it particularly likely Dumbledore will ever have cause to praise him, unless Percy joins the Order, which is still a decision he must make.

"Harry will recover. Your quick actions may have saved many lives tonight. I can only apologise that I was not here sooner. Now, I believe bed is in order—for all three of you."

Dumbledore catches Percy's eye as they turn to leave. "Severus told me that he found you longing for the Mirror," he says softly, his eyes glinting behind his half-moon frames. "Dwelling on dreams can be a dangerous pursuit. I am disappointed in you, Mr. Weasley, for going where you did not belong. You could have been gravely hurt."

Percy *burns* with the injustice but merely mumbles an apology.

"See to it that you care for your brother, and learn to live in this world, and not in that of dreams. If you ever need to talk, dear boy, my door is open to you."

Ron and Hermione eye him sideways as they return to the dorm, but he does not explain his interaction with Dumbledore. They do not need to know why the Headmaster is disappointed in him: it is bad enough that they witnessed his chastising.

Deep inside him, Percy longs to reveal the truth, if only to prove to Dumbledore that he is more than his brothers, that he too is worth the Order. But he cannot, not if he wants to win. He has to tamper his resentment and continue on his lonely path to an unacknowledged victory.

***

As far as Percy can tell, he did not ruin the timeline with the theft of the Stone. Ron tells him that Dumbledore says the Stone was destroyed in the fallout from Harry's attack. Percy registers in the corner of his mind that Harry's mother, apparently, is instrumental in Harry discovering powers previously unknown. For now, he is too overwhelmed by relief to immediately begin researching this new lead.

He tries to clap without resentment when Ron, Harry, Hermione, and even Neville Longbottom are praised in front of the entire school. They all grin shyly, warmly, four eleven-year-olds honoured by the Headmaster himself. Percy knows that he will have to get used to staying in the shadows. Even Neville will slay his serpent.

He bids goodbye to Myrtle and asks her to continue searching the room in his absence. Next year, he'll find the diadem. Now that he has the Stone, many more things are in reach.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Percy. Hope that doesn't have any ~ unforeseen consequences ~ down the line.

EXPOSURE (1/3)

Chapter Notes

> Okay, the next part of this chapter will introduce Tom.
>
> This will be a long year, posted in three parts. Hope you all enjoy. As always, please leave a comment if you're so inclined -- I've been too busy to respond to them over the last week, but I read each one carefully (+ joyfully) and will get to replying as soon as I can!

CHAPTER SIX: EXPOSURE

1992 — 1993 (Percy is 16 & 29, Harry is 12, Snape is 32, Ginny is 11, Tom is 16, and Lucius Malfoy is feeling a bit reckless)

June 1992

Percy does not look at the Philosopher's Stone for over a month.

He's afraid to take it out, afraid Flamel may notice it missing, afraid it may be cursed. He had promised the Mirror he would do no harm, but now that it is in his grasp he desperately wishes to use it.

(Only for money. Percy has his limits and is not foolish enough to think he ought to become immortal. He will only use it for gold.)

Instead, he reads. The Elixir for Gold is, while not common knowledge, not lost to memory either. Flamel published the recipe, secure in the knowledge that he alone possessed the requisite ingredient. These instructions are often used in advanced Potions theory as a hypothetical exercise. Apprentices may be asked by their masters to infer the properties of the mythical Philosopher's Stone.

Percy completes the same exercise, a pit of admiration growing in his stomach. The Philosopher's Stone is a feat of magic he can only dream of accomplishing one day. The stone itself must have incredible magical properties, but it is clear that Flamel had done *something* to enrich it, to transform it beyond a mere gem into something truly incredible.

How old had Flamel been when he'd discovered the Philosopher's Stone? What had he been doing at sixteen, at thirty? Even Riddle had accomplishments that far surpassed Percy’s nearly thirty years of life.

Percy puts his quill down, thinking about it for a second.

If he does not die taking down the Dark Lord—an improbability but not an impossibility, according to his calculations—then he will be trapped in this world forever. He knew the risk when he chose this particular ritual. He will never return to his old life.

But if he were to survive this next decade, well.

Maybe this time he'll finally have some accomplishments of his own.

***

"Are you nervous about Hogwarts?" Percy asks Ginny as they walk through the garden, searching for gnomes.

She shrugs and wipes a dirty hand across her nose. "No," she says, fixing her gaze at the waving grass. "If *Ron* can do it, *I* certainly can."

"I would agree," says Percy with an encouraging smile. He refuses to acknowledge the growing indecision that he feels paralysing his upcoming choices. Should he let Ginny write in the diary?

He has to, for the timeline to proceed.

He can't, if he cares at all about his youngest sibling.

Ginny pounces on a gnome with delight and flings it wildly over the fence. Percy watches her turn to him triumphantly, adrenaline glittering in her eyes.

This is the Ginny he remembers from the end of the war: tough and flushed with energy, ready with a cutting remark or a playful comment. These last few years at home have reminded him that she was like this as a child too, invited more often than not to join in with whatever chaos Fred and George were planning. He thinks of her those weeks after her first year, withdrawn and sad, and feels guilt burn through his stomach.

"I'm a little *concerned*, I suppose, about my roommates," Ginny says after a beat, over-enunciating the adult words in an attempt to be nonchalant. "What if they don't…" she peters out and kicks at a clump of dirt, turning away from him.

"They'll like you," Percy says firmly. He cannot recall in particular any of Ginny's friends, but he knows she is popular among her peers. "And hopefully one day you'll try out for the Quidditch team, hmm?"

She flushes again, this time in delight. "Only *Harry Potter* can make the Quidditch team in his first year," she says breathlessly. "Perce, we could play together!"

Percy waves this aside. He has no idea how Ginny manages to outgrow this hero worship of Harry, and he wonders idly whether Harry knew about it at the time. “I want you to come to me if you have any concerns,” he says firmly. “I told the same thing to Fred, George, and Ron. If you are having trouble making friends or with your classes, or even if you’re homesick. Promise me, Ginny.”

She wrinkles her nose at him. “Okay, *Mum*, I promise.”

They continue looking for gnomes and he lets his mind wander. Why *does* the Chamber need to be opened? Harry rescues Ginny, which perhaps is the catalyst for their friendship and eventual romance. If Ron is to be believed, Harry slays a basilisk. Perhaps Riddle would have set the basilisk on the school? Unlikely; such an ancient creature would hardly be a reliable weapon. Dumbledore becomes aware of the Chamber; he probably puts together the clues about Riddle’s return. But, Percy counters himself, Dumbledore already knows that Riddle is trying to return.

Dumbledore must get the diary, Percy realises with a flash. He learns about the Horcruxes, if he did not already know.

Does Dumbledore *need* to know about the Horcruxes?

As arrogant as Percy admittedly can be, he knows he is a mere candle next to the blaze of Albus Dumbledore. It is very likely, almost certain, that Dumbledore needs to know about the Horcruxes. He likely keeps the diary and learns how to destroy it, or perhaps he does what Percy is planning: to talk to Riddle to learn the location of the other Horcruxes.

Maybe Percy can simply get there first. After all, it does not matter to him who destroys the Horcruxes, as long as they are all destroyed. (Right?) Perhaps he can take the diary from Ginny and find out what he needs and then leave the diary somewhere for Dumbledore to find. Why must the Chamber be opened at all?

He feels a terrible tug inside of him. Thus far, he’s avoided changing the timeline too much (although, the shining red stone in his trunk upstairs belies that statement). To prevent the Chamber from opening would be a direct and intentional meddling in the timeline that he would never be able to take back.

But Ginny. But Penelope, and Hermione, and Justin Finch-Fletchley. But that little Creevey boy, who dies in the Final Battle.

When they go inside for supper, Percy is still frozen with indecision.

***

It feels like barely a second has passed before it is time for Percy’s two weeks with Aunt Muriel, followed by his week with Landon. He packs up his trunk with his best robes, and

after a furious internal debate, leaves the Philosopher's Stone warded and stashed under his bed. He does not want to risk a house elf finding it in his things.

Aunt Muriel looks at him approvingly when he steps out of her Floo. "Sixteen," she says, brushing soot off his shoulder. "Nearly a man. We'll have to get you some proper robes this summer. Have you stopped growing, then? You're tall enough already."

The robes she buys him are exquisite: expensive, darkly coloured, and *new*. (He will not admit to anyone under pain of death, but when he returns to his room, he buries his head in the robes and breathes in their crisp store smell. He only ever wants to wear robes that smell like this).

She sits him down that evening and slides a piece of parchment across the table. He scans it quickly and then meets her eyes solidly.

She is to name him as her heir-presumptive. Considering that Aunt Muriel or his parents are unlikely to have any more children, he may as well be the heir-apparent, but to make *that* kind of claim would keep Percy open to attack from any of his siblings. No, this move is far preferable, and he knows that it was calculated. His aunt is very much like him, for all of her bad reputation.

"It probably ought to be William," his great-aunt says, flapping a hand. "Such a disappointment, that boy. Head Boy, and for what, so he can learn from some foreigners? And Charles, gone the same way."

Percy cannot prevent a smug look from crossing his face. "I would be honoured to be your heir, Aunt Muriel," he says, and stands, sweeping her a low bow with his wand outstretched. "I will uphold the honour of your legacy and of the Prewett house, and I will one day restore it to its rightful place in society."

"Well met, boy," she says as he settles back into his seat. "You've been learning the rituals."

"Madam Tonks sent me an instructive guide."

"Perhaps you should consider marriage to that Nymphadora," Aunt Muriel muses thoughtfully. "You are five generations removed. I shall have to check whether that is an acceptable distance."

Percy only barely manages to turn his instinctive splutter into a cough. "Er, perhaps," he says, resolutely not entertaining the idea of marrying *Nymphadora Tonks*. For one, she'd laugh at him. For another, he's got to be nearly twice her age.

She's nineteen, and he is—well, he supposes he's twenty-eight, soon to be twenty-nine. Not quite twice her age, but something like it. He's closer to Snape's age than Tonks'.

"If I accept you as my heir, upon your seventeen birthday, you shall gain control over the Prewett estate—or what's left of it, anyway. Of course, I shall hold the keys to the vault, but I shall authorise you a secondary pair, though you will have limited retrieval. I shan't have a seventeen year old boy fritter away his inheritance on foibles."

“I would never,” says Percy, injured. On his quest to defeat a Dark Lord, perhaps.

“Perhaps,” Aunt Muriel allows. “Perhaps not. You shall also be eligible for the Prewett seat on the Wizengamot, but I am afraid you shall have to raise the money to claim it yourself. Never fear, you need not be on the body until you are older, you shan’t have much influence now anyway. You also may change your name to *Prewett*, but Percival Prewett—”

They both give matching looks of disdain.

“Yes, I think for now, at least, Weasley will suit.”

Percy reaches out and lays his hand on her gnobbled one. The alliance with Aunt Muriel in this timeline has totally taken him by surprise. If only he had known her as anything more than a grumpy old woman in his previous life. She *is* grumpy, for sure, and irascible and more than a bit prejudiced, but she cares deeply about the Prewett line and wants to do best by her remaining family. “Thank you, Aunt Muriel,” he says again.

She gives him a rare smile. “Thank you, for being worthy.”

***

Tonks gives him an ecstatic hug. “Percival *Prewett*,” she says with a cackle. “Oh, I shan’t ever call you anything else.”

“You can change your name to Tonks Black,” he suggests, sitting hesitantly on the corner of her bed that he generally occupies. He looks around her room with interest. She no longer resides here, in her childhood bedroom, but it looks rather as if she is planning on moving back after the Auror training program is over. She’s removed some of her Hufflepuff posters and replaced them with famous Aurors throughout history, and he spies a thick stack of Auror handbooks on her desk. He is not personally a fan of the propaganda—most Aurors he knows are not nearly so attractive and determined—but each to her own. “Moving back in?”

“The Auror dorms are *horrid,”* she says with feeling, sitting next to him. “And I’m being paid a real pittance. The Ministry is only a Floo away, so Mum said I could stay here.”

“Careful not to bring home disreputable men,” he comments, thinking of Madam Tonks’ disapproving looks. He cannot imagine bringing home a significant other to her, and having to sit through an awkward dinner. Ted Tonks, by contrast, is a jovial and friendly man; Percy cannot understand their pairing even a little, though he can see how their union produced Tonks.

She winks at him. “I never bring home disreputable men,” she says. “I prefer to sneak out of their bedrooms early in the morning.”

“Tonks!”

She dissolves into laughter at the look at his face. “Kidding, kidding, although a man’s bedroom really tells a lot about him. Does he have weird fetishes? Check in the closet for handcuffs or whips. Does his mum still do his laundry? Look at his sock drawer. If his socks are folded, *run*."

Percy blushes harder at the thought of handcuffs or whips. He had to admit that his sex life even before he was sent back to a prepubescent body had hardly been anything to write home about. He and Penelope had ceremoniously lost their virginity to each other, and then there had been a date or two during his time at the Ministry, and then the stress of a Dark Lord had driven all other thoughts from Percy’s mind. He’d barely even taken care of himself during those last few years. Turns out constant terror and guilt was not conducive to a functioning libido. In this timeline, his body has been scrawny and young and the thought of touching himself has turned his stomach more than once. Odd, to feel pedophilic over your own body.

“Oh, Perce, you’ll *know a girl* someday,” she says, waggling her eyebrows at him. “You’re nearly sixteen! No rush. Oh, I’ve got you a present.”

She dives into the mess of bags near her bedside table, which thankfully gives Percy a second to recover.

Tonks emerges with a gorgeous statue of a snow white lynx. He catches his breath and stares at it. Its white fur is luminescent, and as she passes it to him, he feels how smooth the carving is, how solid it is in his hands.

“It’s beautiful,” he murmurs.

“And useful,” she adds excitedly. “It’s made of moonstone, so you can enchant it with a protective ward and it’ll enhance the properties.”

“Always an Auror.”

Tonks nudges him. “Don’t lie, you’re dying to research it. Always a swot.”

This, he can’t deny. He pockets it carefully, feeling rather warm. It’s the first birthday present he can remember receiving from a non-family member since, well, since he dated Penelope. Nearly twelve years ago now.

***

July 1992

Two nights after his return to the Burrow, Percy hears a great disturbance downstairs. It sounds like somebody bumped into the dining table and knocked over a clattering of wooden chairs.

He clutches his wand and casts a detection spell directly toward his floor, but it does not whine to indicate intruders, so the disturbance must be Weasley-made. He rolls his eyes. Some twin nonsense, most likely. Still grasping his wand, he creeps quietly downstairs under a Disillusionment charm.

Ron, Fred and George are all arguing in the kitchen. Two wooden chairs are turned over on the floor. Percy rolls his eyes again. Not a single other Weasley seems to understand the concept of *subtlety.*

“I’m coming!” Ron whisper-shouts, his fists screwed up in anger. “He’s *my* friend!"

“You can’t drive, Ronnikins,” Fred says dismissively. He’s searching through a drawer and making quite a clatter. It’s a wonder their parents haven’t come downstairs yet.

“Neither can you!”

Percy cancels his charm and steps into the kitchen. He has a fairly good idea of what is happening right now, if he is remembering his timeline right. His father had nearly lost his job over this little debacle, so he'd have been hard pressed to forget it. “Evening,” he greets them, enjoying the way all three jump. He does notice that none of them go for their wands, which he supposes is fair, given that it is the summer holiday, but they ought to begin honing their resources now. Perhaps he can start hexing them at random opportunities, just to get their guard up a little. Stinging charms? “Having a midnight adventure, are we?”

“Crikey, Perce, you sound just like Snape,” George grumbles, turning back to his search. “Be quiet, will you?”

“What are you doing?”

“Making a midnight cake, what does it look like we’re doing?” Fred snaps back.

“Looking for Father's keys.”

George, Fred and Ron turn to him as one.

Percy smirks. “Why are you trying to steal the car, then?”

Fred and George exchange looks but Ron, sensing an ally, steps forward. “It’s Harry,” he says breathlessly. “He’s not answered letters all summer. His uncle, he’s—I mean, his family, they’re—”

“Evil?” Percy interjects drolly. He vaguely remembers that Harry does not get along well with his Muggle relatives. Unsurprising; to look after your dead sister’s child, and a magical one at that, and a boy with a price on his head. He wouldn’t enjoy looking after Harry either.

Ron nods furiously, unaware of the sarcasm in Percy's voice. “We *have* to rescue him.”

Percy thinks about it for a second, but then he has to concede. He has to let small things occur the way they once did if he is to have any hope of fixing the big things. The least he

can do is ensure that they happen safely and on schedule. “I’ll drive,” he says, ignoring the looks of shock on Fred and George’s faces. “Let's go before the sun rises.”

***

Percy does not actually know how to drive, but as he’d predicted, his father does not either. All he has to do is press a few buttons and press his foot on the pedal and the car shoots straight into the air. Another button, helpfully large and red, makes them all invisible.

Fred and George whoop as Percy makes for Little Whinging. George is in the front seat, examining a map: he’s the best at directions and the most level-headed. Ron and Fred amuse themselves by rolling down the windows and sticking their heads out over Muggle London.

“All body parts *inside* the car,” Percy snaps. “We mustn’t be seen.”

“Is your greatest hero Mum, do you think, or Snape?”

Percy purposefully accelerates and Ron snatches his hand back with a yip. “Let a bird take some of your fingers, see if I care,” he says, rolling his eyes. Then, a grin. “I would pay to see a Mum-Snape fight, though.”

“You’re being surprisingly cool about this, Perce,” George comments.

Percy gives a little shrug. “What, you thought only Charlie and Bill could be cool?”

“I mean, yes,” says Fred immediately.

Ron, to his surprise, comes to his defense. “Percy can be cool,” he insists.

This warms something inside of Percy that he had not known was cold. “Thanks, Ron. And anyway, someone has to keep you three from killing yourselves. Look sharp, we’ll be there soon.”

They wind their way through the dark and starry night, and Percy feels something a bit like peace. Perhaps this is what it is like to fly, though he doubts it, given that he has a comfortable seat, heating, and a seatbelt. But if this is what Charlie feels in the air, he can understand why he never wants to come down.

But come down they must, and Percy eventually makes a bumpy landing in the petunias outside Number Four. He rolls off them and guiltily eyes their broken stalks.

“Cor, that one’s got bars on his window,” Fred murmurs, leaning out of the car window and craning his head.

“It’s got to be that,” Ron says, rolling down his own window. “Perce, go straight up.”

Percy gingerly presses the levitation button and slowly raises the car to the level of the window with bars. The sight makes him blink rapidly. Well yes, he'd known those Muggles were not nice people, but *bars?*

From the backseat, Ron offers a coil of rope. "I brought this, thought it might be useful."

"Surprisingly well-reasoned," Percy says, navigating the car so that they are facing away from the window. "Fred, *not Ron*, tie the rope to the bars."

Of course, he can do it with magic, but he does not want to have the Ministry alerted to the presence of magic in a Muggle neighbourhood, even if he is not registered with the Trace.

Fred clambers precariously out of the window and onto the boot of the car, tying the rope tightly to the grill and to the bars. He slips back inside and Percy revs the engine.

The bars make a tremendous clank as they come away from the window. All four Weasleys hold their breath, but no lights turn on in the house. Harry's face appears in the window, thin and scared.

Percy hurriedly backs up and Fred, George, and Ron all slither through the open window. He waits, drumming his finger on the wheel, keeping a slow count in his head. He gives them exactly ten minutes before he leaves the car in park and comes in after them.

He's at nine minutes when George begins shoving a trunk out of the window. Some manoeuvring is required, but Percy aligns the car so that George can open the car door. He tumbles in with the trunk. Fred is next, and then Ron, and then Harry—

—and a giant, fleshy hand, wrapped around Harry's wrist.

Relashio, Percy thinks instinctively, his hand on his wand in his pocket.

Luckily, his training on nonverbal magic pays off, and Harry's uncle dances back as if burned, shaking his hand. Ron gives a tremendous pull and Harry comes flying into the car, which wobbles precariously. Fred reaches over them both to slam the door shut and Percy takes off, all four boys in the back yelling *drive!*

It's several miles before everyone calms down. Percy is thinking nervously of Ministry letters, though he reasons said letters would be sent straight to the Dursley residence and not addressed to P. Weasley, the Burrow. The Ministry trace is not particularly *accurate*. More of the Weasley children would have experimented with underage magic had their mother not told each of them in turn, sternly, that any mischief could result in their father losing his job. Given that his mother does not work, that would be catastrophic for the family finances.

"Percy," Harry says finally, as if just now noticing him. "You came too?"

Percy is feeling rather cheerful with his first successful *shenanigan*, as he believes the youth calls these sorts of adventures. He turns and grins at Harry. "Harry, you look thin as a stick. We couldn't just leave you there, could we?"

Harry blinks at him with wide eyes, but a second later it turns into a grin.

***

Their mother, of course, is furious.

(Percy *had* left a note, which did not seem to lessen her ire in the slightest).

Ron gently pushes Harry forward. “He’s not had anything to eat in *weeks*,” he says, looking sorrowful. Harry immediately begins to protest, but there’s no denying the gaunt cast of his face.

His mum switches tack abruptly.

***

"Percy," Harry says cautiously a few days later, Ron tagging at his heels. Molly's oppressive mothering seems to have done Harry some good; he is significantly less pale, and rather filled out. It would seem miraculous if Percy had not noticed his mother surreptitiously lacing Harry's morning pumpkin juice with a health potion. He had wondered at the time where she'd found either the time to brew it herself or the extra funds to purchase it. Regardless, it seems to be doing Harry some good. Hopefully she was submitting her expense receipts to Dumbledore. "What do you know about house elves?"

"Beyond what you already know?" Percy inquires, setting aside the homework he is preparing for the following year. Sixth year is nothing after the OWLs, but he anticipates a serious increase in the time his extracurricular activities will likely take him. When Harry and Ron frown, Percy rolls his eyes. "I thought Hermione was rather—passionate about house elves."

"We're asking what *you* know, Percy, not what *she* knows," Ron says pointedly.

Fred, for once without George, snickers appreciatively. "Why the sudden interest, Ronniekins? Planning to buy one, are we?"

"Sod off," Ron says with disgust. "You know we couldn't afford—" he trails off and flushes crimson. Harry looks equally uncomfortable. Percy wonders idly when Harry had become aware of his immense wealth. Strange that a boy thought to be so giving never considers giving any if it away to those less fortunate.

"House elves are traditionally only property of the wealthy, yes," Percy confirms. "But not for the reason you may think. Many house elves serve under very old contracts, contracts forged generations ago. Their offspring are bound at birth, and so it is difficult for a family without elves to procure any. A pair of elves would have to produce a brood in excess of what a

family needs, and that family would have to deem it worthwhile to sell the elf to another family. Usually the old families can easily support another elf, so it is more a question of access rather than wealth."

"Unless you give them clothes," says Fred, flicking his handkerchief at Ron. “Here you go, Ron. Be free.”

Harry ignores Ron's yelp, leaning forward intently. "So elves...belong to those families, right? And they are usually rich families? Can they disobey their, er, owners?"

"Elves continue to have some amount of free will," Percy says thoughtfully. "In truth, calling them *property* is limiting. But it is difficult for most elves to go against the will of their masters, both due to the nature of their binding contracts and to their inherent subservience. Why do you ask?"

Harry sends a look at Ron, who lies with surprising ease. "You know how Hermione gets," he says with a shrug. "Just going to be prepared."

Percy eyes them both but allows them to flee unimpeded. As long as they view him as an oblivious source of magical knowledge, he has some insight into their activities. He does not know why they would care so deeply about house elves, but he can't remember there being an elf of any particular significance to Harry in the first timeline, so perhaps it does have to do with Hermione.

"Do you think Ron ever gets angry?" Fred asks, out of the blue. Percy raises an eyebrow and Fred continues quickly, "That Harry is so…"

"Wealthy?"

Fred nods and then looks away. The twins became wealthy so quickly in the first timeline that Percy had never troubled himself unduly about how they grappled with the Weasley's poverty. Neither Fred nor George ever seemed to *want* for things in the same way that Bill had, or Percy, or even Ron, but Percy supposes they also spent quite a bit of time destroying what they *did* have in the name of magic. "I dunno," he says, to excuse himself. "Ron's not exactly the most mature of the lot, is he."

“And I suppose Harry doesn't flaunt it,” agrees Fred.

It's an understatement, and they both know it. Percy does think it's surprisingly uncharacteristic for Ron to be content merely to be Harry Potter's best friend, but perhaps Ron enjoys his proximity to fame, or he already is more mature than Percy gives him credit for being. Perhaps a smidgen of both. "I don't think Harry has much access to that money," Percy says thoughtfully. "If I had been his parents I would have set it up that his fees to Hogwarts are paid but most of it would be under trust."

"It would be different, though, to have that money waiting for you," Fred says wistfully. "You could do anything."

"And what would you do?"

Fred hesitates, but then he gives Percy a conspiratorial smile. "Travel," he says, to Percy's surprise, who had been expecting the beginnings of the joke shop plan. "Not like Bill or Charlie. I'd get an international Portkey and spend a whole year going around the world after I graduate."

"It will be good for you to get some independence," Percy says approvingly.

Fred gives him a look. "With George, obviously," he says, and something of the brief moment of intimacy between them is lost.

"I would travel too," offers Percy, hoping to invite the camaraderie back.

"Probably to university after university," Fred snorts, and skips out, and Percy returns to his homework feeling disheartened.

***

August 1992

Landon's house is just like him: polished, imposing, and outwardly severe, but with a sense of humour.

Landon's room, for instance, is outfitted tastefully in several shades of blue. A massive bookshelf takes up an entire wall, and as Percy peruses the titles, he sees several that are undeniably teenaged adventure dramas.

Percy pulls out *Auror Adrian and The Cursed Cave* and raises an eyebrow at Landon.

To his credit, the other boy does not even blush. He merely shrugs and says, "We can't all be so serious all the time, Percy. That one's good, too: *pirates*."

Percy rolls his eyes and carefully slides the book back in. "Whatever you say."

Landon motions him to a small door next to the bookshelf. "I asked Flora to set up a temporary passageway between our rooms," he says, opening it. They step through to the guest room, which is much the same, but outfitted in tasteful red and gold tones. Percy wonders briefly if the Greengrass house elves repaint the room for each guest and judges it entirely plausible.

"Thank you," Percy says politely.

"Your hospitality is well-received," Landon corrects. "I look forward to the chance to repay your family in kind."

Percy repeats this obediently. He had asked Landon to correct his speech when applicable in a belated hope to train himself to use the correct pureblood speech patterns.

Landon gives a small nod of approval. "When you meet my father, incline your head as a show of respect and say, 'my *house* awaits the chance to repay yours in kind.' Since you are representing your house and my father heads ours, that is more polite."

He nods and commits this to memory.

"Why didn't your parents teach you these things? Your mother was a Prewett, she undoubtedly would have been taught the Old Ways."

Percy responds dryly, "They believe following the Old Ways betrays the peace for which they fought in the last war."

Landon hesitates. "Don't tell my father that," he says. "In fact, don't mention the war at all."

They have never spoken about the war. Percy realises suddenly that he does not know where Landon declares allegiance in the second war. He was never particularly close to Landon Greengrass in the last timeline; certainly not close enough to be invited to his house. Landon seems comfortable with Percy's status in society and happily partners with a Muggleborn in Herbology.

But he is a Greengrass.

Well, Percy will have to keep an eye out for him if it becomes necessary.

***

Tobias Greengrass is even more intimidating than Landon at his most icy. Landon presents Percy to him in his leather-tooled study before supper, and Percy gets the distinct impression that the older man would not hesitate to fell even a close pureblood friend of his son's if necessary.

Mr. Greengrass comments without standing, "Heir-presumptive to the Prewett family, are you?"

"Yes, sir," Percy says politely. He does not elaborate; Landon had warned him against babbling.

"Hmm," Mr. Greengrass exhales thoughtfully. "You have six brothers, yes? Why did Muriel choose you?"

Percy blinks both at the unexpected question and the informality of *Muriel*. "I care about our family's heritage," he answers, hoping it is the correct thing to say. "I wish to carry on the legacy of the Prewett family."

"And your brothers do not?"

This is easier to answer. "My older brothers care about their own legacies. My younger brothers have not yet begun thinking about their responsibilities, I think."

Tobias Greengrass stands. He wears glasses like his son, and on him they are refined and graceful. Percy suspects they have spells on them as well; likely detection spells at the very least. One question answered, albeit from several years ago. "So there may be a claim to your title?"

Percy cannot entirely hold back a scoff. "No, sir."

"You are sure of this?"

He thinks of Bill, of Charlie, of the twins, of Ron, of Ginny. "There may be jealousy, or anger," he allows. "But not a claim."

Mr. Greengrass's lips twitch. "Not a successful one, you mean."

"Yes, sir."

The older man continues to survey Percy. "You are top of your class, I hear," he says, inclining his head toward a silent Landon. "Studying to be an Animagus, if my son is to be believed."

After a prolonged silence Percy realises he is supposed to say something. "I like magic, sir." This sounds woefully ridiculous to him, and he tries to avoid a visible wince. "Magic is—magic is power. There's something driving every spell we cast, every ward we enact, and learning what that is gives us power."

Something in Mr. Greengrass' face changes, but Percy does not know the other man nearly well enough to tell what. He tenses, but Mr. Greengrass only responds evenly, "Well stated. I look forward to hearing more about you, Percy Weasley. Please do not hesitate to request aid if the Greengrass house may provide it."

Percy inclines his head and says, just as Landon drilled him, "My house awaits the opportunity to repay yours in kind, sir," and Tobias Greengrass smiles.

***

The week with Landon is highly informative, not least because Percy watches every one of his casual gestures and commits them jealously to memory. From the way Landon imperiously summons a house elf to the way he holds his mug when he takes his afternoon tea—imagine, taking afternoon tea at the Burrow!—each of his mannerisms indicate his good breeding.

Landon's mother, Ameryst Greengrass nee Parkinson (but from the lesser branch, Landon confides, not the main house), is off in Paris, or maybe Berlin. Landon appears unconcerned.

"She's always off somewhere," he says when Percy asks. "She is always dreadfully busy."

The house echoes in the combined absence of the Greengrass parents. Tobias Greengrass is technically home, but he emerges rarely, primarily for meals. He seems to enjoy quizzing his son, and Percy by extension. He's particularly impressed with Percy's grasp of Potions.

Luckily, Landon enjoys chattering, and he fills the days up with various adventures. They scour the library for more information on the Founders (Percy directs research toward the locket and cup, figuring he may as well utilise the resource), practice their duelling (his reflexes have improved some, but not by much), and try some of the more common rituals, both magical and social.

Although he does not mention politics, Tobias brings it up on the last night of Percy's stay. They are having quail—*quail,* it thrills him, just a little—and Percy is silently complimenting himself for the adept way he is handling the difficult bird and the delicate silverware when Tobias storms in and takes his seat at the head of the table.

"Bloody Augusta Longbottom," he grouses, gesturing to the house elf with a short wave. A plate instantly appears in front of him, the roast quail steaming gently. House elf magic. Incredible. Percy wants an elf so badly. Maybe he can buy Mimsy off McGonagall when the war is over and Dumbledore has died.

Landon looks up with a smirk. This is clearly not a new topic for them. "What's the old bird done now?"

Tobias does not correct his son for his informal language. He merely sighs and begins cutting into his meal. "The old lady has *never* forgiven us for my father campaigning against her father for Minister," he grouses. "She convinced the Light contingent to vote down my bloody bill."

"The education bill?"

Percy frowns. "Sorry, which bill?"

Tobias eyes him over his fork. "You're a smart boy, Percy," he says, setting it down. "Son of a Light wizard, too. Let's see what you think about the bill. It would mandate that all children —pureblood or Mudblood—would have to complete one year of schooling before Hogwarts to study Wizarding culture and history, and the class would be mandatory until OWL year thereafter."

Percy is slightly thrown by the casual slur but he doesn't react, or so he hopes. Instead he thinks about the idea proposed. He actually agrees with it. "The Old families have an advantage," he says. "They learn the rituals, the history, the culture. They are more familiar with magical theory, just by being exposed to magic's intricacies."

Tobias nods eagerly. "Precisely."

Landon pipes up, not wanting to be left out. "And it is not a blood status thing, Father. At least not entirely. I know plenty of half-bloods, even other purebloods, who do not learn

about their heritage."

Percy is the obvious example. He does not acknowledge the Kneazle in the room, though he does not fool himself to think Landon was not talking about him. "Is it heritage, though—for Muggleborns?"

Tobias leans back and looks at Percy assessingly. "Perhaps not their heritage, but in a way, I do believe magic is their birthright," he says. "Muggles are—well, they're dirty, I think we can all agree we'd like never to interact with them. But Mudbloods represent a possibility. They are muddy, if you will, as long as they are outsiders in our culture."

Percy cannot help his eyes from flicking to Tobias's left arm, though he knows perfectly well the older man is wearing robes. Tobias catches him at it and smiles darkly, bringing his fingers together in a gentle arch. "Anyone young can be misled," he says simply.

Percy asks daringly, "So you do not agree with their rhetoric?"

"Will you leave if I say that I do?" Tobias challenges, raising an eyebrow. Landon looks between him and Percy nervously. "It is an interesting word you have chosen: *rhetoric*. I believed in a man named Riddle, years ago; I thought he too shared my sentiments. Do I believe in senseless killing? Hardly; I am a powerful man, but I do flatter myself that I do not stray into brutality."

"Your ideal situation may be taking the children at birth," says Percy, coldly, feeling his heart thrum in his chest.

Tobias looks at him, perhaps to assess what Percy himself thinks of the idea. In all honesty, he does not entirely oppose it. Some measure of conformity would, it can be said, quell the dissent between groups.

"Perhaps," Tobias allows. "And yourself?"

Landon tries to interject to diffuse the situation. "Percy's a real swot," he tries. "Likely will just quote theory at you."

Both of the other men ignore him. Percy speaks slowly, aware that his words are carrying weight. "Something must be done." He echoes Tobias's earlier words. "I think we can all agree on that. I too am not one for—brutality, if you will. Neither am I one for needless optimism. Our current system is flawed, but I will admit I do not yet know what I believe would be preferable. Education would be a fine start."

Tobias picks up his fork to start eating, and some of the tension leaks out of the room. "Tell that to Augusta," he says, his voice warmer. "Bloody bint suggested I was trying to indoctrinate an army of Mudbloods. I told her, I'd be happy for her to share her own history with the students, even teach a bloody class."

Percy also slowly resumes eating, though he can no longer derive nearly as much enjoyment from the succulent quail.

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Percy spends the rest of the summer writing essays and practising his Animagus transformation. He's getting closer: he can now comfortably transform his hands and feet, but the two stress areas—head and torso—remain elusive. Professor McGonagall made him swear he wouldn't practice those without supervision, so he contents himself by focusing on his paws until the shift is instinctual.

The Philosopher's Stone is beautiful. He dares not attempt the Elixir of Gold in the Burrow, but he enjoys looking at the Stone when everyone else has gone to bed. It glows faintly from within, a deep and sombre red. The edges are smooth and geometric, and he *feels* the magic emanating off the cool surfaces. It feels different than other magical items he's encountered in the past, almost *alive*, though he cannot describe precisely why that may be.

The Elixir of Gold is *fascinating*. The Stone's power, he theorises, is due to its ability to absorb and magnify magic with its own unique properties: its own transformative force, Professor McGonagall may say. The Elixir proceeds in two parallel steps: one brew that seems, as best as he can tell, to strengthen and heal the Stone, and another to prepare lead to be transformed into gold. It's Potions and Transfiguration in one procedure, and he finds its simple but brilliant elegance inspiring and comforting in equal measure.

For his birthday, he receives an owl, to match his thirteen Outstandings. Seeing Hermes at the store is like greeting an old friend. Percy watches him stretch his tawny wings and feels, for a wild second, less alone. (His parents look a bit surprised when he requests such an expensive gift, and not even for his seventeenth birthday, but he insists on Hermes with such vehemence that they indulge him).

He begins to watch Ginny. He actually cannot recall how Ginny got the diary to begin with. He goes through her room, wincing his way through several non-Horcrux diaries that he fervently hopes she burns before she turns fourteen (or at the very least, before she dates Harry). Had he inadvertently ruined this timeline? Had something he'd done prevented her from receiving the diary, perhaps as a gift?

And then, his father picks a fight with Lucius Malfoy at a bookstore.

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(Later, he wonders: had Lucius always been targeting Arthur? Had the elder Malfoy come to Diagon Alley with the intention of slipping the diary to his nemesis' youngest child? Or had it been a decision on a whim, or even an accident, the book tumbling out of Lucius' hands? Had

Ginny battled the Dark Lord because his father was too stubborn to avoid a man too powerful to fight?)

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In the moment, however, Percy burns with embarrassment. He cannot remember this happening the first time around, but he rarely spent trips to Diagon Alley sticking close to Ginny. Typically, he preferred to go on his own to the bookstore.

This time, however, he has the dubious pleasure of watching his father humiliate himself.

Actual fisticuffs! His father *actually throws a punch* at Lucius Malfoy—and Lucius Malfoy reciprocates! As a small consolation, Draco Malfoy looks equally horrified to see his father rolling around in the ground with Percy's while a crowd of onlookers gawk and take photographs. One upside, Percy thinks to himself in the midst of his pained amusement, of his father battling Lucius is that Lucius won't allow any of these photographs to see the light of day.

"One wonders what they think is the positive outcome of this encounter," Percy mutters to himself. Draco actually smirks at this before he realises he is smiling at a Weasley. Percy hastily speaks again before Draco can incite Ron into the same behaviour as Arthur. "I do not believe we have ever been properly introduced. Percy Weasley; I greet you in the name of our shared House."

Draco frowns. "Our shared House?" He repeats dubiously. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Percy, what are you *doing?"* Ron, behind, hisses.

"Our grandmothers were first cousins," Percy takes pleasure in informing Draco, who looks both thoughtful and appalled. "One would consider it rude to not respond to such an introduction."

Draco collects himself, perhaps spotting his father getting up from the ground, blond locks askew. He extends a smooth hand and shakes Percy's. "Draco Malfoy. I greet you in the name of our shared bewilderment."

Percy gives a genuine smile. They quickly drop their hands before their fathers return. Because Percy is standing so close to Draco, he easily spots Lucius withdrawing a small parcel from his coat pocket and adding it to the stack in Ginny's cauldron.

Percy tunes out the insult, narrowing his eyes at the package. If that is the Horcrux—his mind leaps ahead—why does Lucius Malfoy have it? A prominent Death Eater, a prominent pureblood, yes, but to be trusted with a Horcrux? (He can't know of the Horcrux's true nature, otherwise he would not wantonly slip it to a Gryffindor student, especially a Weasley.) Had he meant to open the Chamber? Did he know Tom was back? (No, he couldn't; he would

never lose a Horcrux on the eve of his master's return). Why wouldn't Tom immediately begin rallying the troops? (Perhaps he was too weak after his defeat?) Why wait until now? Perhaps Lucius is aware of his return but not of his Horcrux—

"If you don't go back to your hovel, Weasel, I'll begin to think you want to come home with us, and we don't accept strays," says Draco nastily.

Percy blinks. He's the only one still standing there.

"I spent part of the summer with Landon Greengrass," Percy responds absently as he scans for his family. There, in line to pay. He can already foresee what is going to be a humiliating episode: his mother is fingering the pouch with a look that he is very familiar with, suggesting that she will begin to consolidate their purchase within the next few minutes. He would not be surprised if they all share one set. Harry has also noticed and is fingering his own pouch of gold—considerably heavier, Percy is sure—uncomfortably, as if wondering whether to offer to pay. Honestly, Percy would welcome it. It isn't as though Harry does not owe his family money, not after staying with them every summer for years. "His house was grand, but I imagine Malfoy Manor is something to behold. I would like to see it one day."

"You're not like your brothers, are you," Draco says after a pause. Without the malice in his tone, he sounds much younger.

Percy quirks his lips. "If they were your brothers, would you want to be like them?"

The amused smirk on Draco's face mirrors Percy's own, Percy is sure, and he takes a moment to centre himself before he very formally and exaggeratedly bids Draco adieu with his best pureblood manners, to which Draco responds in kind. Tonks and Draco would get along, he thinks absently, his mind still on Lucius Malfoy. Perhaps after the war he can introduce them.

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Percy debates with himself for several hours, but he finally decides to allow Ginny to write in the diary for the last week of summer, though the decision does not quite Percy lets Ginny write in the diary for the last week of summer. He tells himself firmly that it takes several months for Tom to enslave her, and he cannot help but feel that it will be important for Ginny to know who Tom Riddle is. What if she tells Harry something important, something critical, something she learned when writing to Tom? Still, he tries to always watch her when she is writing in it, cataloguing the childish amusement that crosses her face every few minutes. Now that he is looking for it, it’s obvious from the cadence of her writing that Ginny is holding on a conversation.

He wonders what Tom says to Ginny, whether he is disappointed that his target is a mere eleven year old girl. He’s sure he’d prefer a more worthy adversary, someone with backbone and wit. Not that Ginny is not smart for her age, but she *is* eleven. From the content of her

other notebooks, Percy can say with some authority that she's unlikely to write anything to Tom worthy of much notice.

He sees her Sorted into Gryffindor with approval—that's the last of the Sortings, he can relax now—and sits near enough to her at supper that he can monitor her integration into the House. He'd done the same thing with Fred and George and Ron, and Bill had done it to him. Ginny immediately strikes up conversation with the girl next to her, and Percy nods to himself quietly. She'll be happier this time around.

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September 1992

Why in *Merlin's saggy left tit* Ron and Harry thought it was a good idea to fly to Hogwarts in a flying car—

—he towers over them in the Common Room, and they cower.

"You will *never* do that again," he states in a cold whisper. "You betrayed my trust, Ron. Harry, I expected better of you."

That Fred and George come up behind him with high fives is unforgivable. Percy spends the rest of the night in a glower.

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As is his custom, Percy wakes early before breakfast the next day and reports to Snape to request another year of tutelage.

As is his custom, Snape surveys him for several minutes before deigning to reply. "And why would I bother with your ineptitude, Mr. Weasley?"

Percy holds up the pair of dragonhide gloves he'd found in the Room last year. "I have the proper equipment, sir."

Snape raises an eyebrow. "Only a fool would call those pathetic excuses for gloves *proper equipment*. How goes your inspired foray into soul magic, then?"

"Ongoing," Percy responds promptly, ignoring the note of ridicule that Snape injects into the question. He hesitates, but takes the risk he calculated to be necessary. "I'd like to learn about the Philosopher's Stone, Professor."

Snape's gaze sears. "*Do* you."

"It elongates life; it must have some tangential relation to soul magic, sir," Percy explains. "My brother tells me it was in Hogwarts all of last year."

"Your sorry excuse for a brother would refrain from telling tales if he knew what was best for him," Snape says in what is almost a grumble.

Percy does not deny this. "I would have liked to see it," he says wistfully. He hides a smile at the unimpressed look on Snape's face. "I never thought to study it before. I found a series of thought exercises in a book over the summer, meant to aid a student in discerning the properties of the Stone itself." He takes a series of neatly bound papers out of his bag. "I thought we could study both the Elixir for Life and the Elixir of Gold."

"Fancy immortality, Mr. Weasley?"

"Only immense wealth, Professor," Percy quips, entirely truthfully.

Snape holds out a hand for the proposal and flips through it idly. "A juvenile attempt at a research proposal, but an adequate starting point," he compliments Percy, who has to fight to keep a grin off his face. "And are we any more popular with our peers this year?"

Percy rolls his eyes. "I spent part of the summer with Landon Greengrass. Oh, and I think Draco Malfoy might actually like me, if you threatened him to admit it."

Snape pauses in his perusal of the proposal to give Percy a sharp glance. "You met Tobias Greengrass?"

"He seemed impressed with me," Percy cannot help but say casually, as if he received the esteem of wealthy pureblood heads on a daily basis.

Snape shakes his head slightly. "You are to inform me if he contacts you," he dictates to Percy. "Having Tobias' acclaim is not necessarily something with which to be pleased. The same goes for Lucius Malfoy."

"Sir?"

"You are the son of Arthur Weasley and Molly Prewett, practising Dark Magic and studying the soul," explains Snape, raising an eyebrow. "You would be a conquest for any man like Tobias, I suppose Lucius included. You may think of yourself as a wolf, Weasley, but you are but a rabbit. Do not let yourself be trapped in their jaws."

Percy wrinkles his nose at the thought but nods. It is unlikely either will contact him anyway, so it is an easy promise to make.

Snape gives a short nod in confirmation. "Monday, Thursday, and Friday at four in the afternoon," he dictates. Percy tries not to be surprised that Snape knows when his free periods are. "Ingredient collection as necessary."

"Yes, sir." Percy turns to go.

“And how proceeds the Patronus?”

Percy’s face immediately sours.

Snape looks delighted. “A continued failure, I take it. No need to ask about the Animagus transformation. I daresay one shan’t come without the other.”

“Ongoing, Professor,” Percy corrects. “By the end of the term, I’ll have at least one completed.”

“See that you do, or I may continue to doubt why I sully myself with your presence,” Snape says and motions him out.

His failures in mind, Percy stops by McGonagall’s office instead of heading directly to breakfast. She is still inside, gathering up the schedules to hand out to her House in the Great Hall.

“Mr. Weasley, how was your summer?”

“I told Professor Snape I’d have either my Patronus or Animagus by the end of the term,” he says without preamble. He needs her to know the stakes of this term.

Professor McGonagall coughs to hide a smile, but he sees it anyway. “Well, that may have been premature of you, Mr. Weasley. Both are incredibly complex pieces of magic.”

“How frequently can we meet this year? Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays?”

“Tuesdays and Thursdays; my Saturdays are my own, Mr. Weasley,” she responds chidingly. “You may take the opportunity to practise your Patronus on the weekend, however. Why don’t you ask Professor Flitwick for help? He tells me you no longer take tutelage in Charms.”

Percy has never warmed to Professor Flitwick, who seems to watch him more closely than Percy thinks he merits. He shrugs one shoulder as McGonagall ushers him out of the office, locking the door behind them. “I’ve Potions tutorial three times a week as well,” he explains as they make their way down to the Great Hall. “I am not nearly as passionate about Charms as I am about Transfiguration or Potions.”

She bestows upon him a warm smile. “More passionate about Transfiguration, I hope. What are you attempting with Professor Snape?”

“We’re beginning by studying the Philosopher’s Stone. Er, because I learned from somebody that it was here at Hogwarts last year.”

Professor McGonagall snorts. “Albus should have Obliviated all three of them. Your brother is quite a troublemaker, Mr. Weasley.”

“Which one?” Percy asks dryly. “After the Stone, we’re to look at the portraiture potion, though I don’t reckon Snape will let me actually try it. I also wanted to ask him about healing potions, since I have a theory they dabble in soul magic as well.”

McGonagall nods decisively to herself as they reach the Great Hall. “I can’t lose to Severus Snape,” she says, turning to him. “We’ll get your Animagus finished by December, and you can tell him that it’s a promise from Minerva McGonagall.”

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Ron makes up for the car incident slightly by defending Hermione in some unspecified incident with Draco Malfoy calling her a Mudblood. Percy hears all about it from Oliver after practice, and Percy makes a note to congratulate Ron and advise him on different spells he can use on Draco that won’t result in him retching slugs.

***

Ginny writes in the diary *constantly*. Percy watches her at breakfast, feeling concerned. She looks so small, the bags under her eyes pronounced. He’s all but decided he can’t have the Chamber opened; the risk is far too high. It’s unlikely that all of the potential victims will seek refuge in reflection, and he can’t have the life of a Hogwarts student on his head.

He’ll have to take it from her, and earlier than he thought.

***

He introduces Ginny to Myrtle. Myrtle beams at her and spends the entire afternoon chatting with her about Harry Potter. Percy, working on his essays in the corner, rolls his eyes to himself but does not interfere.

“I’ve noticed you writing in that diary quite a lot, Ginny,” he tells her as they leave Myrtle to her own devices and begin walking back to the Common Room.

She deflects this easily. “I can’t believe you’re friends with *Moaning Myrtle.* How did that even happen?”

Percy studies her carefully. Her skin is pale but she does not yet look gaunt and unhealthy. Perhaps Tom will need more time to establish a hold on her. He thinks that this brief brush with the Dark Lord will help to stabilise the timeline, and give her something to bond with Harry about later. He can’t be sure that it isn’t important for Ginny to have something of a window into teenaged Tom Riddle.

But this time he'll watch carefully. As soon as it looks like Tom is exerting his hold, he'll step in.

"I really think you should spend the weekend with your friends," he persists. "Or even talk to one of the ghosts, or portraits—they get lonely, and they're full of stories. Or, we can go to the library together."

Ginny flushes and looks down. "I don't have any friends," she admits in a tiny voice.

Percy has an inspired idea. "Spend the weekend with Fred and George," he says encouragingly. "They've missed causing havoc with you these past few years. Now you can all do magic, too."

(He goes to breakfast with brilliant golden hair and wears it if not proudly then without complaint. Landon stops by to tell him he looks ridiculous, but Ginny is laughing and so he merely raises a pained eyebrow).

***

Lockhart is as much of an idiot as the first time around. More of an idiot, since now Percy has proof that he's a complete fraud.

Why does Dumbledore continue to hire such utterly useless professors to teach such an essential topic? As the last year made abundantly clear, Dumbledore is perfectly aware that the Dark Lord is not dead, and for all he knows, the shade has made off with the Philosopher's Stone. It does not take a time traveller to foresee war may be in the imminent future. Perhaps the younger kids would be fine, shielded by Hogwarts or their youth or their parents, but Percy's generation would be on the front lines, whether by choice or necessity. They deserved better instruction. How many of his peers would have survived the war had they learned the necessary skills to defend themselves?

***

October 1992

Myrtle floats ahead of him. "This is *boring*," she complains, flying through a large, ornate cabinet. "Why do we keep looking through here?"

Percy is meticulously righting her wrongs and continuing to tabulate the contents of the Room of Hidden Things. He's claimed several useful things for his own, and so he rather

enjoys these little outings. They are like excursions into Hogwarts' past. Perhaps he ought to be a historian, if he finishes off this war alive. He can befriend the pretty Muggleborn Librarian at the Ministry. (It occurs to him that she actually may be his age, though physically there would be a bit of a gap). "It's useful," he says. "Who knows what could be in here. Think about it."

"Maybe the Sword of Gryffindor," Myrtle says, brightening.

Percy purses his lips. Doubtful, but possible. "Any of the Founder's Artefacts, really," he says encouragingly. "Keep an eye out."

"How was your summer?" Myrtle keeps a few paces ahead, making a desultory attempt at searching.

"It was productive, I—"

"Only two more years and you'll be gone," Myrtle wails, not giving him a chance to finish. "Percy, what am I going to do? I'll be so *dreadfully* bored, nobody *ever* comes to visit me."

Percy closes his gaping mouth and then just as quickly opens it again. "That's hardly true. You told me girls visit you all the time. They tell you their secrets."

"*You* don't even tell me your secrets," she sniffs. "And their secrets are *boring*. Sometimes I want more than *ooh, he's so cute* and *oh, I'm so lonely*."

"But Myrtle, you love those types of secrets," Percy feels compelled to point out. He should know; he'd been hearing secondhand reports of them for years.

She floats faster. "And, and, and there'll be no more *adventures*, and no more *maps*, and no more *Occlumency*. Just my stupid old bathroom."

Percy walks faster to keep up. "Myrtle," he says pleadingly. "You'll find something to do. Another student will come along and be just as interesting. Harry Potter goes to school here now, don't you know."

She sniffs, considering this. "I suppose, but it won't be the same without you, Percy, and you can't even *write*."

"I'll write," he promises, without the faintest idea of how to deliver on that. "Mimsy can deliver the letters to you."

"But I can't write back!" Myrtle wails, and promptly bursts into tears.

Oh, bugger.

"Do you still want to be a ghost, Myrtle?" Percy asks cautiously after several minutes of Myrtle metaphorically drenching the room. Luckily there are no pipes present and so her tears merely drip cool ice down his shoulder.

"I've not got an option, do I," is her mumbled response.

Percy narrows his eyes. “That can’t be true,” he thinks out loud. “What can be created can be destroyed, you know that, Myrtle. If you really don’t want to be a ghost anymore—if you just want to rest—we can figure out how to make that happen. But if you do want to continue being a ghost, I promise you that you’ll find something interesting to do.”

The Dark Lord will eventually invade the castle. That should be plenty interesting for Myrtle.

She stops crying and considers this. “You have to find out,” the ghost says with increased urgency. “I’m not saying *yes*, but I know you, Percy Weasley. You’re going to graduate from here and find something interesting to do and you’ll forget all about me. I want you to figure out how to let me, let me *rest*, and tell someone in the castle before you graduate.”

Nearly one month of school, and he has not one but three deadlines to meet, not to mention a bloody Dark Lord. He feels a headache coming.

But it’s *Myrtle*, the ghost who somehow has become his closest confidant. He thinks of himself trapped in fifty years of lingering and shudders. “I promise,” he says solemnly, and even though he is all but promising Myrtle to kill her, she raises a gleaming head and smiles at him.

***

Friday lessons with Snape, he finds, are surprisingly intimate.

The week draws to a close; the castle feels emptier, everyone off to begin their weekends; and Snape seems tired, almost more mellow.

This October has been a chilly one, and Percy arrives for his weekly lesson to find Snape simultaneously brewing no fewer than ten large cauldrons of Pepper-Up. He barely acknowledges Percy's presence.

"Complete ten inches on the dual properties of the Stone as an reactive agent as well as protective," Snape says, waving a hand to the corner.

Percy sets his things on the desk and ventures, "Perhaps first I could help, sir?"

"And why would I subject the fine young minds of Hogwarts to your abysmal definition of help, may I ask?"

Percy approaches cautiously. "Because you do not overly care whether they live or die?"

This succeeds in producing an actual smirk of amusement from Hogwarts' most feared professor. Percy files away the memory to use during Patronus practice. "Indeed, Mr. Weasley. Headache Draught, if you will. No more than three cauldrons; I cannot stomach an explosion at this hour."

It's barely four, but the afternoon has already turned into evening, the ensconced flames the only source of light in the room.

Percy sets up five cauldrons. Snape eyes them but does not comment, which Percy takes to be a win.

When his Draught is bubbling a merry cerulean, Percy dares to make conversation. "Is this not Madam Pomfrey's task, sir?"

Snape allows an expression of displeasure to cross his face. "One would think, but our esteemed headmaster chose not to hire a matron proficient in brewing."

"Seems a bit unfair," he says, stirring continuously. He tests out a bit of nonverbal magic on the other cauldrons and watches with satisfaction as their stirrers also begin twirling in the air.

"You'll need to learn wandless magic, too," Snape comments with a nod. "What's the point of all of this, Weasley?"

Percy tries for another joke. "World domination?"

Snape's unimpressed look informs him that one joke per session is plenty. "You're too frightened of the unknown for world domination," he says dismissively. "But what is your drive? I know you are not as passionate about soul magic as you claim."

Percy gives an uncomfortable shrug. "Ambition," he says uneasily. "Not directed anywhere—yet. I like the challenge. I want to be equipped for whatever is out there."

"And what is out there?"

Percy shrugs again. "You tell me, sir."

Silence falls as they return to their brewing. Percy finishes the first set of Headache Draught and bottles them into twenty neat vials, four per cauldron. Merlin, no wonder Snape looks stressed. To supply enough stock for the entire school is a Herculean effort.

“How are your studies of Dark magic progressing?” Snape says conversationally after he too begins a new batch.

Percy flinches. “Sir?”

Snape raises an eyebrow. “I did not say your *practice*, merely your *studies*,” he breathes silkily.

“Adequate,” Percy says honestly. He has not tried many more Dark spells, but he has found he has a talent for the rituals. They are a combination of magic and Potions and Arithmancy, and he finds the process of setting them up and completing the necessary steps to be both fascinating and calming. Dark spells are wilder; he always feels somewhat unsafe when he endeavours to cast one of the spells in his books.

“Do try not to lose yourself to the thrall this year,” Snape lectures. “You have much to accomplish if you have a hope of achieving your goals of portraiture, if they indeed are genuine goals and not merely a—front, shall we say, for other ambitions.”

Percy hopes very much that his face does not betray him. “It is true I have not yet decided what I want to do after Hogwarts,” he says in an effort to distract. “It is unlikely I will become a portrait artist, yes. But something about that potion has fascinated me since I first saw the instructions. It is a goal of mine, at least for this year.”

“Do your parents know of your dabbling in the Dark Arts?”

Percy snorts. “I hope not. I doubt I would still be alive if they knew.”

“How did you discover the Mirror of Erised?”

“I first discovered it with Ron and Harry,” Percy responds, thrown slightly by the non-sequitur. He has found that Snape is unlikely to scold him for his casual bending of the rules, and so tries to be as honest as possible. “Harry snuck out of the dormitory over Christmas and somehow found the Mirror.”

“Typical,” Snape drawls. “I suppose the Boy Who Lived so charmed you that you followed him on the errand?”

“I followed him because I do not want him to lead my brother into trouble,” Percy snaps back. “Harry obviously has his own ideas of what he wants to do, and following the rules does not appear to be a concern of his. Ron, for whatever reason, is loyal to Harry. They’re twelve; they’re both idiots. The least I can do is make sure Ron doesn’t get hurt.”

This quiets Snape, if only for a second. “You think a friendship with Harry Potter is liable to hurt Ronald?”

Percy smiles bitterly. It may be the most important relationship in Ron’s life, save perhaps his friendship—and blossoming romance—with Hermione Granger. It is also, without question, the most dangerous. “Has it not already?” Snape acknowledges him with a mirthless smile. “I followed them, and I saw the Mirror. Separately, I learned they had seen the Cerberus, and they mentioned there was a trapdoor.”

“And you had to follow, of course. Typical Gryffindor disregard for the rules—”

“You spent your fair share of the year skulking around the door.”

Snape narrows his eyes. “I am a professor of this school, and you are a mere child,” he hisses.

“Professor,” Percy dares, “Was Quirrell harbouring the Dark Lord?”

Silence.

“A dangerous accusation,” Snape breaks the silence finally.

Percy returns to stirring with a bit more force than necessary. “I heard enough from Ron that I could piece it together,” he explains, feeling his fingers tingle with anticipation. What will Snape tell him? “Dumbledore told Harry that Quirrell was hiding the Dark Lord in his turban. He also said the Mirror of Erised was hiding the Philosopher’s Stone. Ergo, the Dark Lord possessed Quirrell to try and get the Philosopher’s Stone.”

He stops staring and meets Snape’s eyes. “He’s not dead, is he, Professor?”

Snape’s intrusion into his mind is subtle, but Percy feels it, the way tendrils snake around the inside of his skull. Without missing a beat, he throws up his shields.

“Your skills in Occlumency are worse than your questionable attempts at deduction,” Snape says, pinning Percy with a stilling glare. “Who taught you this skill?”

“I taught myself, out of a book.”

“You must have been practising for years to reach this level.”

“I thought my skills were abysmal.”

“Do not deflect the question, Weasley.”

Percy crosses and uncrosses his toes inside his shoes. He should have known better than to bait Snape, to get him to reveal something about the Dark Lord. Percy may trust Snape but Snape thinks of Percy only as a precocious student and tolerable company. He had to tread carefully, now. “I learned about it when I was researching soul magic in my second year,” he says, in what is not exactly a lie. “Soul magic and mind magic are similar. Professor McGonagall even discussed it with me. I thought I might as well learn to protect my mind.”

“What secrets do you have?” Snape’s tone is deceptively light, but Percy is not fooled.

“Well, I am practising Dark Magic,” he says, hoping the inherent humour in his words will be sufficient to distract Snape. “Not something I wanted Dumbledore to pick out of my head.”

“And do you have reason to believe Headmaster Dumbledore practices Legilimency?”

“Always assume the worst of your enemies,” Percy parries. “You’ve told me that.”

Snape leans forward victoriously. “Interesting that you consider Headmaster Dumbledore one of your enemies.”

Percy swallows. Exchanging wordplay with Snape is like swimming in the ocean; novel and fun, for the first few minutes, and then abruptly dangerous and unpleasant as one becomes aware of what *else* may be swimming besides. “I do not have many allies,” Percy says honestly. “All else are potential enemies.”

“It’s an interesting world view for a young Weasley child,” Snape says thoughtfully. He never ceases his practised gestures over the multitude of cauldrons around him, but Percy does not doubt for a second that Snape could have him tied and silenced in a second’s time. “Where did you pick that up?”

A war, he thinks. “With five brothers, you have either allies or enemies,” he tries to deflect again.

Snape pins him with a beady stare. “The protections you sought to shield your mind with only serve to inform me that you have a secret,” he says softly, dangerously. “I may not be able to rip it from your mind without risking damage to your brain, but you will tell me, Weasley.”

Percy gulps and stays silent.

Snape’s lips stretch once again into something resembling a smile. “I am patient,” he says, settling back to his brewing. “But I do tend to achieve my goals. I look forward to learning your secret, Weasley. Your cauldron is about to boil over; I told you that you could handle no more than three.”

Percy starts and moves quickly to save his potion. He lost that round; that much is apparent.

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As October draws to a close, windy and wet and entirely unpleasant, Percy allows himself to be convinced by Myrtle into attending Nick's Death Day party. At the very least, he counsels himself as he neatens his workspace in Myrtle's bathroom and wards it under a heavy set of spells, it will be an interesting anthropological perspective. Perhaps he'll gain some clarity on whether banishing Myrtle as a ghost would be the right or the wrong thing to do.

He finds it difficult to clear his mind as he walks down the draughty corridor with Myrtle at his side. He does not have nearly enough time these days; he thinks enviously of his first few years at Hogwarts, where he would spend hours practising wandless magic or reading about souls. There were a number of preparations he wished he'd undertaken then, but even when one had hindsight in spades, it was not enough.

He's still working on his Animagus, of course, and his Patronus; Snape is now regularly and openly tries to catch him unawares and dive through his Occlumency shields, which forces him to practice building his shields several times a day; he is monitoring Ginny very closely to determine whether he should step in and take the diary; he's rereading all of his old notes about Tom Riddle, trying to plan his strategy for speaking to him; he's continuing to search the Room of Hidden Things for the diadem; and he's slowly gathering the ingredients he would need for the Elixir of Gold, one mail-order at a time.

He averages around five hours of sleep a night, and he's taken to glamouring his appearance after McGonagall warned him she would no longer oversee his lessons if he could not take care of himself.

(Spelling his appearance to be calm and unaffected and healthy—at least that was one skill he picked up during the Dark Lord's reign proved to be useful now).

"*Percy?*"

He stops suddenly at the sound of Ron's voice. The Trio is standing in front of him, politely holding plates of rotting food.

Percy blinks, taking a moment to digest the scene.

There are more ghosts than he's ever seen in one place, ghosts he had never heard of or ghosts he had merely glimpsed over his years at Hogwarts. Even the Grey Lady hovers in one corner, while the Baron stalks another. There are groaning tables filled with rotting food, a cruel facsimile of the Halloween feast going on below.

"You didn't tell me you were friends with *Harry Potter*," Myrtle says both coquettishly and completely inaccurately, as they have had an uncomfortably large number of conversations about the small boy hero.

Percy rolls his eyes. "Down, Myrtle, he's too young for you."

Myrtle pouts, enjoying the reddening flush of Harry's face. "For now."

"Ron, Harry, it is my utmost pleasure to introduce Hogwarts' most annoying ghost," Percy says with a sigh. "Myrtle Warren, Ravenclaw."

"I told you that Percy would be here," sniffed Hermione triumphantly.

"Forgive me for not believing you and Gin when you told me *Percy* was friends with *Moaning Myrtle*," Ron says, turning on Hermione.

Percy sees the wobble of Myrtle's translucent lip and acts quickly. "Myrtle, go tell Nick we're here, will you?"

When she's gone, Percy glares at Ron. "I know you're twelve, but do you think you could have the common decency to not refer to someone by a humiliating nickname *to their face*?"

"You called her annoying!"

"She's my friend!"

Ron scoffs. "We're back at the same question," he points out. "Why are you friends with *Moaning Myrtle*?"

Percy exhales in irritation. "I don't know what you want to hear, Ron. That I was a lonely eleven year old? That Myrtle is easy to talk to, and I didn't abandon her once I made other friends?"

"You couldn't find a *normal* friend—"

"Leave it," Harry breaks in, his voice suddenly hard. Percy looks at him in surprise, but he's looking only at Ron. "You can't limit who he's friends with, or say they're—they're not normal."

The two boys stare at each other uneasily, but the tension is broken by Hermione snickering. "I'm sorry," she says, grinning. "It's just, I'm thinking of my friends from Muggle primary school, and what they'd say if they knew who I was friends with now. None of us are normal to them!"

Even Ron smiles at that, and Harry retreats into the quiet shell he normally carries around with him. Percy eyes him speculatively; it's always interesting to see Harry show signs of his future character.

The rest of the party passes fairly amicably. Myrtle only sheds tears once, when Peeves starts to tease her, but the Baron is there to scare him off before he takes it too far. Percy wonders whether the ghosts think of themselves as friends, as family, or whether those labels no longer occur to them.

They must, though. The ghosts clearly have thoughts and feelings and relationships, allegiances and loyalties. They may be dead, but there is a sort of life here, or something approximating it.

As the party winds on, Percy finds himself surprisingly hungry. Fully aware of his tendency to skip meals, he's tasked himself with eating three regular meals per day, preferably in the Great Hall so he can make an appearance. Normally he eats without thinking: vegetables, brown rice or pasta, and whatever the healthiest protein option for that day appears to be. It has been a while since he's felt any sort of desire. Perhaps it is the ghosts reminiscing over their favourite meals, or the unchecked looks of longing on their faces as they float through the rotting offerings on the table.

Percy eyes Ron and then figures the risk is worth it. Percy has much less of a reputation for being a stickler for the rules in this timeline—he hopes—and since McGonagall did not seem him worthy enough for the Prefect badge, he feels much less of a responsibility to hold up the rules.

"Do you all know where the kitchens are?"

"Are we allowed in the kitchens?" Hermione says keenly.

"When you're a senior student," Percy says half-truthfully. No professor save perhaps Snape or Vector is liable to take points from an older student making a trip to the kitchens for a snack between meals, but it is not explicitly allowed.

This mollifies Hermione and he begins to lead them out of the dark corridor. He's engaged in an interesting conversation with Hermione, whose ideas on house elf freedom are naive but well-intentioned, and Ron, who is no less disparaging of them this year than he was last year, when Harry stops suddenly, jerking his head to the left as if scenting blood.

"Did you all hear that?"

Percy frowns intently at Harry and slides his wand out of the holster. "What?"

"That voice…" Harry trails off and his eyes widen behind his round glasses. "There!"

"We don't hear anything, mate," Ron says cautiously.

"It's going to kill," Harry whispers, horrified, and then he's off like a spell careening from a drunk wizard's wand.

Percy shares a bewildered look with Ron before all three of them race after Harry by mutual agreement. They skid past the stairs to the Entrance Hall, hearing the low murmur of the feast concluding—Percy's stomach growls—and then follow Harry's tiny figure up the stairs.

They come to an abrupt halt on the second floor, directly across from Myrtle's bathroom.

"Harry, what in Merlin's name—" Ron begins, only to trail to a halt.

Percy looks in horror as the words he'd hoped never to see drip in blood on the halls.

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED. ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

Ginny.

"Where's Ginny," Percy demands urgently, turning to clasp Ron's arms.

Ron shakes him off, his freckles staining against his pale skin. "She went to the Feast, I think...Percy, is that, is that *Mrs. Norris?* "

Percy spins around and takes in Mrs. Norris' stiff figure. They're too far away to tell if she's Petrified, or dead.

They are all four frozen, the silence broken only by a cruel, gleeful shout. "Enemies of the Heir, beware! You'll be next, Mudbloods!"

Percy turns with a scowl. Draco catches sight of his face and cowers slightly, backing into his thug of a lackie.

Percy takes a step toward him, joined by Harry and Ron, when they are stopped by the sight of what seems like half the school packed into the corridor.

There's a pause, and then Snape sweeps to the front, forbidding as always. He takes in the scene and then looks directly at Percy. The now-familiar feeling of his mental intrusion slides into Percy's mind, but he can't even bring himself to do anything more than expel him.

He'd failed Ginny, again. He'd had breakfast with Ginny that very day, and aside from some circles under her eyes, she'd seemed perfectly fine.

He had to get the diary, tonight.

"It was him," howls Argus Filch, pointing directly at Harry.

"Don't be foolish, Argus," McGonagall sniffs, looking instead to Percy. "Mr. Weasley, what happened here?"

Percy shakes himself and then opens his mouth to answer. He can at least protect Ron from detention. "Ron, Hermione, Harry, and I were at Sir Nicholas's Death Day party," he explains, hearing a murmur break from the crowd. "You can ask nearly any of the ghosts at Hogwarts to attend to our presence. We were hungry, so we began to walk back to the feast." He pauses and feels the burn of Harry's desperate stare on his back. "We heard something, a loud noise, almost like a crash. We came to see what it was, and we saw the blood."

Snape narrows his eyes. "You pinpointed the scene of noise with unerring accuracy," he says silkily.

Percy throws him an unimpressed glance. "We just kept walking down the corridor and stopped when we saw...this."

McGonagall waves her wand over them, shaking her head in concern. "And you didn't fetch a professor?"

"I thought it was Peeves, Professor," Percy says innocently. "He was teasing Myrtle at the party, and I thought he may have come by the bathroom to torment her some more."

Why *are* they opposite Myrtle's bathroom, anyway? He hopes she's unharmed.

Dumbledore arrives then and sweeps the whole thing aside. Percy listens with half an ear, thinking. There's something here, something that doesn't add up, something important that he's forgotten.

His head jerks back up when he hears Dumbledore pronounce Mrs. Norris dead.

Dead?

With a flash, it comes back to Percy. There's no water on the floor. In the original timeline, Myrtle must have flooded the bathroom; perhaps Ron or Peeves did tease her to the point of actual sobs. In this timeline, Percy has spent several years buffering her self-esteem, and her outbursts are significantly less common. She may even still be at the party.

And now Mrs. Norris was dead.

Thank Merlin she's only a cat.

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They are released after Dumbledore questions them more closely. Snape's dark glare promises retribution, both to Percy and to Harry. The Trio is silent on their way back to the Tower, though he knows they are exchanging meaningful—or perhaps just bewildered—looks the entire way back.

Whispers start when they step through. Percy's yearmates look seconds away from surrounding him, but he looks pointedly at the three second years he is chaperoning and they back off. He settles the Trio in a set of large squashy couches and tells them to stay there. Ginny is nowhere to be seen.

He leaves the three behind and reluctantly approaches his yearmates. "Theodora, can you go into the girl's dormitory and see if my sister is there?"

"Only if you promise to tell us what's going on." Her face is tight and drawn.

"After I make sure my siblings are fine, yes," he says irritatedly. Why can't everyone just get out of his *way?*

Theodora reappears with a pale Ginny. Percy leads her over to Ron, ensuring she sits on the sofa. He fetches her a blanket from the basket in the corner near the fire and spreads it over her when she makes no move to take it from her.

"Did you not go to the Feast, Ginny?" Hermione asks warmly, putting her hand on Ginny's shoulder. Percy notices the flinch, which echoes painfully in his stomach.

Ginny shakes her head. She looks haunted, overwhelmed, and once again Percy feels incredibly guilty. He'd *watched* her this time, too! Just yesterday, he'd sat next to her at lunch and heard her cheerfully recounting her latest flying lesson. "Is there something you want to talk about, Ginny?"

She meets his eyes for a long second before she shakes her head rapidly. It's a mark of how unsettled she is that she does not react to Harry's presence, even when Ron begins to question him about the voices in low tones.

Fred and George arrive and steal a pillow from Ron, though the act seems more of an automatic nervous tick than a true effort to tease their younger brother. They exchange worried looks with Percy, also clearly noticing the state of Ginny. He tries to impress upon them nonverbally that they have to do a better job of watching her. He had specifically told them to bring her to the Feast.

Hermione, however, has her eyes on Percy. "What's the Chamber of Secrets, and who's the heir, and why do they hate Muggleborns?"

Silence falls, not just among their small group but in their corner of the common room. Theodora and Mariana inch closer, Henry and Alex not far behind.

Percy sighs and adjusts his glasses. Much to his frustration, he does not know much more than what is said in *Hogwarts: A History*, but at least he can answer without worrying about the future too much.

"Each of the Founders were said to have left legacies," he begins, marshalling his thoughts. "Objects, weapons, knowledge. The Sorting Hat is famously thought to have been Gryffindor's. If you do some research, there are numerous things thought to have been left by the Founders: jewellery, artefacts, amulets, and so on."

He sees some nods. This is familiar to most Wizarding families.

"Each of the Founders also in theory could have left an impact on the school itself. It is very possible each had their own set of chambers or private rooms while they resided here, that presumably housed these legacies, or at least their belongings. None of these have been found, of course. The castle is over one thousand years old, and as we all know, it has a mind of its own. Furthermore, the Headmaster can slightly change the layout as needed to fit the needs of the student body."

"Is the Chamber of Secrets Slytherin's?" Hermione leans forward, looking fascinated. Of course she would; this would all be new to her.

Percy shrugs one shoulder uncomfortably. "It's a rumour; it's never been proven. Even if there is a Chamber of Secrets, it's likely to be warded against any intruders, or more likely, completely empty. You must remember that over a thousand years of students walked these halls. It's likely if the Chamber of Secrets existed, it would have been found by now—or that if it does exist, it is buried far beneath what we can access."

"Not if you need the Heir to find it," Harry says quietly, darkly.

Ginny flinches. Percy doesn't miss it.

"Perhaps," he allows. "All four founders had children, and so presumably at least one heir exists for each House. However, once again, it's been over a thousand years. We've lost the records of who may be the direct descendents of each founder. It's more likely that many of the old pureblood families are in some way related to at least one Founder, just by virtue of the British Wizarding community being fairly small."

"And Muggleborns?" Hermione asks in a small voice.

He tries to smile at her reassuringly. "Well, it's true that Slytherin did not want Muggleborns in the school, although we do have to remember that times were different then. Muggles were actively rounding up wizards and witches to kill, and Muggleborns often chose their community over their magic. However, many who believe in his ideology continue to distrust Muggleborns or feel a sense of superiority, and yes, many of them belong to families that traditionally sort Slytherin."

Ron snorts. "Never trust a snake."

Percy gives him a stern look. "Not all blood purists are Slytherin, and not all Slytherins are purists. It's said that Slytherin kept a monster to hunt Muggleborns—and that the monster still lives—but I, personally, find that patently ridiculous. To begin, Slytherin was an immensely powerful wizard; he could have attacked Muggleborns himself, rather than resorting to using some sort of beast. Furthermore, even if he *had* some sort of monster, that was over a thousand years ago. Very few, if any, magical animals could possibly live that long."

"Who do you think wrote that message?" George asks, looking suddenly very young. Fred shifts closer and presses his shoulder into his twin.

Percy watches Ginny flinch again, harder than before. "An imitator," he says with authority. "Someone seeking to intimidate, perhaps. I wouldn't worry; Muggleborns are safe at Hogwarts. Dumbledore will not let any student be harmed."

"They killed Mrs. Norris, though," Ron says darkly. Ginny shudders and begins to sob. Fred and George quickly each throw an arm around her.

Percy looks around at the silent groups of people listening to him soberly. His eyes seek out Henry, House Prefect, who stands still and serious.

"A scare tactic," he says finally. "We do not need to be scared; we're Gryffindors. Keep your eyes open and stay in groups. You won't be hurt, but some people may be emboldened by this and try to hex Muggleborn students. Please go to your prefects if you encounter any trouble."

With that, he stands. He needs time to *think.*

EXPOSURE (2/3)

Chapter Notes

> Does anybody know how to prevent ao3 from adding spaces before and after italicized words???? They just appear randomly!! In the text editor, there won't be any spaces, and then as soon as I hit publish they just appear to ruin my life. The only way to squash them is to re-edit, remove them, and hope ao3 is satisfied with my pain.
>
> Anyway. Thanks for all the comments on the last chapter. I'm so gratified to see so many of you enjoy my little nerdy interludes on soul magic, or all of the auxiliary plot points that Percy gets himself involved in. I've made some notes for things to add in future chapters based on some of your comments so definitely keep your thoughts + suggestions coming!
>
> This one is a little shorter, but the next one will be long. Will try to clean it up and post it over the weekend so I can start revising year 7.

CHAPTER SIX: EXPOSURE (2/3)

1992 — 1993 (Percy is 16 & 29, Harry is 12, Snape is 32, Ginny is 11, Tom is 16, and Lucius Malfoy is feeling a bit reckless)

The Weasleys stick together the next couple of days. The entire school buzzes about the Chamber, exchanging notes, reading passages from *Hogwarts: A History*, talking about Slytherin's feud, and even buying and selling amulets. It really ought to be Henry's job to prevent the young Gryffindors from spending their money on dangerous artefacts, but alas, it falls to Percy to confiscate several noxious necklaces from Neville when one explodes at lunch. Percy marches him to the library and points to the section on shielding charms, and adds, as an aside, that he ought to make copies of the book for the rest of the House to read.

Ron and his friends are snooping, as usual; Percy catches them coming out of Myrtle's bathroom one day, whispering together.

"If you're going to interrogate Myrtle, I hope you did so respectfully," he says archly.

The three of them start as one. "Did she tell you something?" Ron says eagerly. "She just cried for us."

Percy rolls his eyes. "Don't let me see you three back here unless you have a legitimate reason," he says, shooing them away.

Myrtle is indeed crying; Percy unwards his desk and chair and sits down, eyeing her thoughtfully. "You weren't here that night, were you."

She sniffles but seems to collect herself. "No," she responds, voice thick with tears. "I was with Anthony."

"Why here," Percy says to himself thoughtfully. Moaning Myrtle's bathroom; not exactly the most auspicious area of the castle for Tom Riddle's Horcrux to haunt. Then, an idea. "Myrtle, where exactly did you die?"

"Here," she says and lifts a trembling hand. "Right over there. That's where I saw the eyes."

Percy leaves her to her sobs and goes over to examine the sink, tracing his finger over the small silver snakes that adorn the handles. The thought that's been niggling at his brain the past couple of days finally coalesces.

The basilisk needs some way to get around the school unseen.

"How big are the pipes, Myrtle? How wide, would you say?"

She stops crying almost entirely as she considers this. "I can stretch my body in some of them," she says thoughtfully. "Others I have to squeeze in. Why?"

Percy worries his lip as he thinks about it. "You know how I think what killed you was a basilisk," he says consideringly. His public stance is, of course, the opposite, but it does not take an expert researcher to determine that the intersection between the set of magical creatures that could conceivably live for over a thousand years and animals rumoured to be aligned with the Slytherin line is very small indeed.

She nods.

"I think it may be going through the pipes," he continues, absently playing with one of the faucets. Perhaps in Myrtle's day, there was an opening in the pipes in one of the walls, or the basilisk had been smaller. "I think someone has let it out again."

She inhales sharply. "But he's dead, isn't he?"

They don't have to clarify who *he* is.

Percy looks at her squarely. "I'm not so sure he is."

***

Myrtle promises to spread the word to the ghosts, so they may keep an eye out for the basilisk. Meanwhile, Percy plots how he's going to steal the diary; on Saturday, he decides, during the Quidditch game. He's already asked Ron and Hermione to bring Ginny.

On Friday, he gathers his courage and goes to his lesson with Snape.

"What do you know?" Snape says as soon as he enters, not even bothering with the pretence of subtlety.

Percy knows that Snape won't rip through his head and risk causing brain damage if he thinks he doesn't need to press that hard. In the meantime, Percy has done some thinking and concluded that the school needs to be prepared for a worst case scenario.

"I think it's a basilisk," he says and meets Snape's gaze steadily.

To his surprise, there's no intrusion into his mind. Snape stares at him, and there's a hint of panic in the man's normally inscrutable face.

"Explain," Snape says, his voice flat.

Percy sets down his bag. "As you know, I am friends with the ghost Myrtle."

Snape nods impatiently, his hand gripping his wand tightly, as if he will be asked to charge off and defend the school instantly. Percy tries not to let Snape hurry him; he will have to be careful with what he says.

"Myrtle was killed fifty years ago, and the last thing she remembers is a large pair of yellow eyes. She was killed in a bathroom, the same bathroom she haunts now, and the same bathroom where Mrs. Norris was found dead."

"Pipes," says Snape, whose powers of deduction are something to be feared.

"Yes, I think so too," Percy confirms.

Snape thinks for several long seconds. "I will need to inform the Headmaster."

"Perhaps we could have roosters?"

"And tell Pomona to cultivate her mandrake crop carefully," Snape continues thoughtfully, as if Percy isn't even there.

Percy jumps when Snape's attention snaps back to him. "You will take over brewing for the infirmary," he orders him briskly. "I need to research the Petrification Draught."

"You think I'm right?" Percy asks in some amazement.

Snape looks at him sourly. "Loath as I am to say it, I believe you may be, Mr. Weasley. Have you any theories to who may be behind these acts?"

The Dark Lord hangs between them as if suspended on a rope.

"Only what we have discussed before, sir," Percy manages.

"Quite," says Snape, and that is all that is said on the matter.

***

Percy is not proud of how he gets Ginny's diary.

The injunction against boys entering the girls dormitory is a surprisingly effective deterrent. Percy cannot get beyond the slide that the stairs turn to under his male feet. He tries to levitate himself through on a very wobbly Levitation charm, but he is unable to sustain it for more than a half second. The corridor is too small to fly through, and likely warded against that possibility. Mimsy refuses to steal another student's possession for him, Myrtle cannot be trusted with the transport of an entire book, and Percy cannot think of a single female friend who would fetch his younger sister's diary for him.

And so, feeling unaccountably nervous, he points his wand to a second year girl in the common room and casts a silent *Imperio*.

After a tense silence during which Dumbledore fails to barge through the door, Percy proceeds. The girl's mind is soft and pliant, and he makes a note to learn Legilimency in addition to Occlumency. He gets strange wisps of her memory and personality as he commands her silently to go into Ginny's dorm and search for the diary.

If he concentrates, it's almost as if he can see through her eyes.

He's not proud of his actions, but there *is* something fascinating about the Imperius Curse. He'd read about it; at one point, it was not considered unforgivable. It had been developed to use on animals, of all things, and then corrupted for use on humans. It was widely considered to be the most humane of the Unforgivable curses, the most common, and the easiest to cast. It somehow manages to superimpose someone's will or another person, often without them realising. One could give the person an instruction once and have them continue to act on it for months without needing to maintain the curse the entire time. Instructions can be vague, and the victim retains enough of their mind to continue to solve basic problems such as walking upstairs or unlocking doors.

The girl manages to find the diary. Percy knows his sister well enough to know where she might hide things. There isn't much privacy in a dorm room. The diary is under her mattress beneath where her head would be.

He instructs the girl to leave it at the foot of the stairs. He whispers an Obliviate and leaves her blinking in confusion next to her friends, trying not to think about the ease with which the spell flowed through his wand.

The diary looks innocuous. Brown leather, with faded gold trim. Masculine, but the edges are soft, the pages creamy. It looks like the type of notebook his mother would fish out of the secondhand bin for Ginny, or even for George, who has a notebook collection to rival their sister's.

Ginny wouldn't have questioned it in her cauldron. After the humiliation of the day, she would have assumed it was a gift, maybe for starting her first year at Hogwarts, that had slipped everyone's mind.

Percy traces the cover with his wand. A standard detection spell reveals nothing; neither does the more advanced variant that he had developed. Frustratingly, the diary does not show up on the Marauder's Map, though the shade of Riddle that had possessed Quirrell *had*. Did that imply something about the diary? Was it weaker, perhaps, or less active? Percy tries every flavour of *hominum revelio* he can create, but none indicate that what sits in front of him is a Horcux. Could he be wrong?

He shivers slightly.

If he is correct about this—and despite the Map, the neatly inked Tom M. Riddle in the front cover suggests he is—this is the Dark Lord's very first Horcux, created via the murder of Percy's best friend.

It's a piece of his *soul*.

Percy takes a deep breath and turns to the first page. He knows Ginny wrote in it, and that somehow provides Tom with the strength he needs to control her. If Tom controls him, it would be—unthinkable.

But he *has* to write in it. He has to charm Tom into revealing the truth of the other Horcruxes.

But he has to do so without surrendering his own soul.

He's a nearly adult wizard, he counsels himself. In another world, he’s almost thirty. He's not a twelve year old witch. At the very least, he's the same *physical* age as Tom had been when he’d created the diary.

He has to not reveal too much of himself. He feels as if he knows this instinctively. Soul magic relies on the soft exploitation of self-knowledge, or on utter dominion. Given what he observed with Ginny, Tom was not dominating her; he was slyly and insidiously controlling her, exerting more influence day by day.

With a steady hand that betrays none of his hesitation, Percy dips his eagle quill into the vial of his very best ink and writes, *Thursday, November 12, 1992.*

Transfiguration: two feet, the first recorded human transformation.

Charms: practice the Vanishing Charm, practical Monday.

Potions: thirteen inches on the properties of elk's horn. Perhaps as a congealing agent?

When Percy lifts his quill, Tom writes back. Percy smiles grimly. He'd had a suspicion that incorrect Potions theory would awaken the beast within.

You're thinking of bison horn, I'm afraid. Elk has rather different properties.

Percy counts to two hundred slowly in his head. A student would be shocked or frightened; not excited.

Hello? Is somebody there?

The words seep away, to be replaced with ***My apologies for startling you. My name is Tom Riddle, and this is my notebook.***

Why would Tom introduce himself with his true name, rather than an alias?

He barely has time to wonder before the answer hits him: pride, of course, of the flavour that oft goeth before the fall.

I'm sorry. I found it in a corridor. What House are you in? I can return it.

I was in Slytherin, many years ago. I animated this book with my memories when I graduated, but I left it behind in Hogwarts, I think. I'm afraid I did it incorrectly; whatever you write in ink is lost to fuel my response, so students often move on to sturdier tools.

A pause.

Unless you'd like to talk, of course.

Oh, he's good. Percy thinks he would have responded to this, had he been less cautious. Diary-Tom has probably inferred that Percy is a fifth or sixth year, given the topics of his assignments. The way he's writing is friendly and non-threatening, invoking positive memories of Hogwarts, inventing an excuse for the books' discarding, and slyly inviting Percy to write back.

Would Percy write back?

Percy thinks of Landon, his boyish enthusiasm, his conviction that with the powers of magic, he could fix any problem he may encounter. He'd write.

How did you capture your memories in a book?

I'm afraid I don't recall the process. It was a variation of a Pensieve, I believe. I remember up until I purchased the book, and the rest is blank. I think I must have enchanted it. I'm hoping one day I'll figure it out again.

If the victim's first question is *how*, it's a good guess that he would respond favourably to this bait. Tom neatly suggests a wild goose chase through Pensieve magic, a fascinating and diverse branch of little-known sorcery. Through the inevitable discussions, Tom would slowly extend his claws.

Percy's fine with a brief segue into Pensieve magic. He has to avoid as many personal questions as possible. After six years of hiding his status as a time traveller, he can claim competency at this particular skill.

You must have been very talented, he writes envyingly.

Tom's reply is both smug and condescending. ***Yes.***

***

Percy doesn't manage to write more in the book that night; it turns out that somebody curses a bludger to attack Harry, and the excitement of him losing the bones in his arm due to Lockhart's blunder takes up much of the evening.

Percy can't imagine who would be targeting Harry. It can't be Tom; he can't be powerful enough yet to be exerting that much influence. Ron claims it's Snape, but this sort of assault isn't Snape's style. Enchanting a bludger is quite tricky, too. It's unlikely that Draco, Ron's second choice, would be capable of such advanced magic.

He puts it out of his mind for now. Harry has no shortage of enemies. Any reasonably competent fifth year could probably figure out how to enchant a bludger.

He thinks instead of Tom, of what he is going to say to him when he next speaks to him. Percy has decided that to be safe, he will only write to Tom immediately before his lessons with either McGonagall or Snape. That way, if Tom tries to possess him, one of them will come looking.

He spends much of the night thinking of Tom.

***

What Tom knows about Percy:

Sixth year Ravenclaw, first name Ignatius. Blood status: half-blood (*my father was a Muggleborn)*. A few siblings (*we're not particularly close)*; pureblood mother (*she's not very fond of me, I think),* absent father (*Always busy, but to be honest, I've never known with what)*.

Precocious (*Charms and Transfiguration tutelage)* and smart (*eleven OWLs, mostly Os)*.

What Percy knows about Tom:

Sixth year Slytherin, first name Tom, last name Riddle. Blood status unknown. No siblings; parents unknown. Smart, of course, and arrogant. Sentimental for Hogwarts. Sarcastic and witty.

What Percy wants Tom to learn about him:

Resentful of his peers, thirsting to prove himself. Smarter than he first appears. A little lonely; only a follower to a worthy leader. Someone who could feasibly be a good right hand man, someone with a mind but could be led. Someone who would resist possession.

He proceeds slowly.

***

November 1992

Harry, Ron, and Hermione think the Heir of Slytherin is *Draco Malfoy.* Percy watches Draco, who is enjoying preening under the attention, and yet again reminds himself to tell Tonks to take the boy under her fierce wing. He's never able to write to her; he keeps forgetting until it's too late to head out to the Owlery.

“You know, the real Heir of Slytherin would not want everyone to know who he was until the opportune moment,” Percy cannot help but comment to Draco when he passes him one day. “It’s a bit foolish to take on his enemies without any of his power, isn’t it?”

This cows Draco a little, but does not prevent Ron from his irrational hatred. First Snape, now Draco. Percy thinks some of it may have to do with their generation’s status as the victory boom class. Of the Weasleys, only Ron and Ginny had been born into peace; perhaps that was why they launched themselves so recklessly into the war when the time came. Percy does not remember the war from his childhood, but he can remember a vague sense that his parents were tired and stressed the entire time, a sense of lurking danger, like the Dementor under the bed was everywhere.

Ron’s peers are all born right after peace, to parents who still eye each other with mistrust if they run into each other in Diagon Alley. It’s ironic, really, that they would fight for something they cannot uphold.

Percy goes to a study group twice a month, and it’s headed jointly by a Slytherin and a Gryffindor, albeit two pureblood girls who were close friends prior to Hogwarts. He’s close friends with a Ravenclaw. In Ron’s year, those sorts of relationships are far less likely to occur, and become even increasingly less likely as the war begins to build again. Perhaps because their parents went to Hogwarts during the partisanship of the last war? It bears further thought.

Regardless, Percy does not shy away from patiently explaining to Ron yet again that he should cultivate a friendship with Draco, not destroy it.

Professor McGonagall has exempted Percy from the homework on self-transfiguration. (To a point; he thinks with some resignation of the scrolls he neatly completed over the summer). Instead, she's challenging him to find a research thesis, something he could use to apply to one of the more prestigious wizarding universities.

(He's torn—oh, how he'd love the chance to study in the exalted halls of one of those institutions, but he must stick to the timeline. He must position himself to be close to the Minister).

He's so impossibly close on his Animagus transformation. He's grown comfortable with the idea of himself as a lynx: small, lithe, cautious, vicious. But the idea of taking that final mental leap, of abandoning his humanity for the small white figure, scares him in a way he cannot entirely verbalise.

"You cannot have control over everything," she says at the conclusion of yet another failed session. Her voice is heavy and disappointed. "There may be mistakes; that is why I am here, to supervise. But you must take that leap of faith, Percy. You must trust your magic to be your anchor."

He says nothing. Trust his magic—that's about all he trusts these days.

Maybe what he does not trust is himself.

***

Trust your magic?

Something about the self-transformation exercises we complete in class are unsettling, Percy admits, leaning back in his bed. He isn't as stupid as to reveal he's studying for the Animagus transformation, but he needs to talk this through with someone.

Tom's reply is thoughtful. ***What are you unsettled by? The potential for mistakes? The loss of control?***

Percy thinks this through. Magic can set right nearly anything he may do to harm himself, particularly if McGonagall is watching him carefully. Perhaps the loss of control? But he is in control the entire time.

The uncertainty, he finally replies. *I do not know what it feels like, or what to expect. In the moment, it will be new to me.*

Tom seems to enjoy these moments of teaching where he can have authority over a boy his own age. Idly, Percy wonders if Tom thinks of himself as sixteen or fifty. Perhaps it's similar to how Percy feels, caught between ages.

It will be only one moment of uncertainty, the diary counsels. ***And then you will have access to self-knowledge. To power, even.***

You're right, Tom, Percy writes back, and he means it. Now to flatter. *How did you learn so much magic so quickly?*

I am talented at many things, Ignatius. If we can ever get me out of this diary, I'll have to show you.

Percy grins despite himself. He is realising that Tom, while sharp, is predictable. He wants Percy to help him get out of the diary, and he'll say what he needs to say to make that a reality.

I look forward to it.

***

The first duelling club of the year is a mixed bag. Percy enjoys tremendously the look of dark amusement on Snape's face as he blasts Lockhart into the far wall. The other members of his defence study group catch each other's eyes and grin; it's possibly the only time Percy has ever exchanged a smile with a Slytherin, with the possible exception of Draco Malfoy.

Draco is as pale and pointy as ever, and he quickly turns what could have been an amusing evening into something entirely different. Except—

Percy looks at Snape, who alone looks unruffled at the news that Harry Potter is a Parselmouth.

Snape had told Draco to set a snake on Harry.

Why?

How could Harry even *be* a Parselmouth, anyway? Percy had honestly forgotten about this little episode from the first timeline, and as he silently listens to his classmates chattering away about the surprise after the club concludes, something about the episode bothers him. Percy does not believe that tripe about all Parselmouths being Dark Wizards, but he does think it likely that the gift passed itself down through the Slytherin line. Parselmouth, like other innate magical abilities, is likely hereditary. Tonks, for instance, can trace her morphing ability through the Black line. But Percy had researched the Potter family, quite extensively, and he hadn't seen any ties to Slytherin. So why would Harry have this gift?

Percy could have missed something, of course—as he'd told Hermione, nobody was *quite* sure how the lines of each Founder developed to the present day. But the Gaunts claimed they were descendants of Slytherin, and that Tom opened the Chamber fifty years ago seems to corroborate their claim. Try as he might, Percy can't find a way to connect the Gaunt line with the Potter's, and even though he thinks it's likely inconsequential that Harry can talk to snakes, it still bothers him immensely.

***

Tom, did you ever have a duelling club?

I was never one for organised sport, I must admit.

Percy huffs a laugh. *Ours is run by an absolute buffoon. Professor Lockhart. He knows more hair spells than duelling spells, I'd imagine.*

Who is the Headmaster?

Albus Dumbledore. I've never met him, though. I don't think he's at the school very often.

I know Dumbledore. He was the Transfiguration professor once. I'm afraid he does not like me very much.

Percy thinks about how to respond. *It's probably because you're a Slytherin,* he writes. *I've noticed that he has a preference for the Gryffindors.*

Percy feels something like a scoff in his head. ***Typical***, Tom writes, somehow conveying a haughty drawl in the loops of his Ls.

I admit I'm not his biggest supporter, Percy continues. *I don't particularly get the impression he cares very much about the school. It seems like he just wants the position for some sort of power.*

He does, Tom replies. ***Everyone is blinded to his naked ambition—but I always knew. He would sacrifice a student in a heartbeat if it allowed him to achieve his goals.***

Percy agrees with this. The body count at the end of each war is evidence enough. When one is a Hogwarts student, it feels entirely natural that battles should be fought in classrooms and dormitories; the castle is one's entire life from eleven to seventeen. Of course Death Eaters would break in; of course monsters would roam; of course peers would fall. Where else would be the centre of attention?

Ageing out of Hogwarts, however, provided Percy with quite another perspective. One war was being fought in the Ministry, arguably where the war should be fought: in still hallways and silent trials and crowded cells. Another was being fought in the countryside and in towns, between Snatchers and those fleeing a terrible fate. That too Percy can understand. Every Dark Lord relies on fear and respect, and in order to elevate the Death Eaters above the rest, there needed to be a lesser class of thugs, still ostentatiously on the same side as those in masks and cloaks, but rough enough to give Tom's preferred followers a sense of satisfaction.

But why would any of that war have to creep insidiously through the hallowed halls of Hogwarts? Dark wizards and Light wizards alike looked back on their years at school with fondness. Percy can't imagine, based on how fondly Tom speaks of Hogwarts, that he wanted to destroy the school; shape it to his own image, perhaps, but nothing more. There was no need for Hogwarts to become a battleground; there was no need for *Dumbledore's Army* to induct a new generation of child soldiers.

Part of me wants Dumbledore to notice me, Percy admits to Tom. *But part of me knows that his attention will bring nothing but hardship.*

Something that Slytherins know is the value of being underestimated**,** Tom writes back slyly.

I hate being underestimated, Percy complains, whines even. He says it to make Tom laugh but he also says it because it's true, even through two lifetimes.

Tom's instructions appear in a firm script. ***You must use the time you are unseen to become great.***

Tom is many things: undeniably cruel, mocking, arrogant. But Percy can admit that he is truly great—or at least, he becomes so. Certainly one of their time's greatest wizards. It's seems unfair that Harry must be the one to destroy him. Harry is not particularly *great*; he is strong of heart and loyal and determined, all of the things that heroes ought to be. Percy quite likes Harry, in this timeline, now that he's spent more time with him, but he's realised that despite it all, Harry is just a boy like any other.

Meanwhile, Tom understands things about magic that it takes Percy days to struggle through. He can still help Percy with his essays, even when it is the second time around that Percy is writing them, always ready with an extra comment or an interesting fact to enrich Percy's existing knowledge. He's invented his own spells. At sixteen, he discovered the secrets of Horcruxes and split his own soul. What chance did Harry have? How could he possibly hope to battle such a wizard as Tom? How did he have the courage (or the foolishness) to continue on, when he was so plainly outclassed?

What had Harry done at sixteen? What had Percy?

***

Fresh off another purification ritual—Percy does not know *how* the Map, either version of it, divines the password to the Prefect's bathroom, but he certainly can admit it makes his task far easier—Percy pulls his hangings shut, as is his tradition, and pulls out the diary. He'd relaxed slightly the injunction that he should only speak to Tom before his lessons with either of his preferred professors; this version of Tom seems very far removed from the Dark Lord that Percy remembers with such horror.

Percy finds to his surprise that for all of his misgivings about Tom, he actually enjoys talking to him, at least this teenaged version of him. This Tom is not yet a Dark Lord; this Tom is arrogant and cold and clearly aware of his own power, but also hungry for gossip and news and interesting facts that Percy can dig up for him in the library. This Tom knows six ways to jinx an annoying classmate and three separate secret passageways to cut down on the walk between Arithmancy and Herbology, at opposite ends of the grounds. This Tom is smart and

clever and at times rather funny, equipped with a dry sarcasm that causes Percy to chuckle to himself out loud, more than once.

Moreover, it seems to Percy, this Tom seems to like him back.

Of course, he is on his guard for artifice, for false flattery, for insincere compliments. But Tom seems to be incapable of that sort of obsequiousness, at least to a junior wizard he believes to be so clearly his inferior. Percy finds the best way to communicate with Tom is a bit how he would communicate to Snape, if Snape were aware that he and Percy were now approximately the same age. Percy is always polite, always interested, and always obliging.

Do you think it is necessary to purify oneself after performing Dark Magic?

Tom's answers are always immediate, as if his consciousness is awakened by the act of Percy putting his quill to the page. ***Have you been practising Dark Magic?***

Only a little, writes Percy honestly. *I know it's silly, but I'm a bit afraid of the effect that Dark Magic could have on me. It's hard to separate propaganda from theory in some of these books.*

Tom's reply, when it arrives, is clearly derisive. ***A strong wizard should never be afraid of any magic, Ignatius.***

Percy flushes at the rebuke and scribbles, *Well, I would say that taking reasonable precautions is never foolish.*

Reasonable, writes Tom, underlining it with a heavy hand. ***Is it reasonable to fear magic merely because it is new to you? All magic is about power, Ignatius, and Dark Magic more so than others. Light Magic relies merely on cause and effect; but Dark Magic relies on magical strength, on willpower, on your ability to exert control over your magic.***

So when the books caution that performing Dark Magic can corrupt you

Before Percy can continue writing, Tom's script fills the page. ***To be corrupted by Dark Magic is to succumb to it, to allow it to control you rather than the opposite. If you are at risk of being corrupted by Dark Magic, you have no business practising it.***

But how would you know you are strong enough to control it?

Tom's reply takes longer, this time, which gives Percy a second to calm his breathing. These conversations can agitate him, and he feels as though the same could be said for Tom, based on the velocity of his responses. Sometimes speaking to Tom can be dizzying. Percy has found that the best way to stall Tom is to distract him, either with a question, an interesting tangent, or even a joke. Not that Percy is particularly funny, he supposes, but Tom seems to like his wry observations, as long as they are not at Tom's expense, which Percy would never dare.

An interesting question, Tom allows. ***Have you ever felt the strength of another wizard's magic? Dumbledore, perhaps, or one of your professors?***

Percy thinks about this, but all he can think about is the Dark Lord, during the one time that Percy had been close enough to him to feel his throat close as the Dark Lord's magic swelled to fill the halls of the Ministry.

Once, I suppose.

Have you learned to have an awareness of your own magic?

During the Animagus transformations—or his attempts at them—Percy has been learning to foster an awareness of his own magic, to feel it gathering over his skin, sitting in his core, and spreading through his veins. To both his and McGonagall's frustration, Percy does not struggle to visualise his magic, but rather to access it as a transformative force.

Yes.

Try a similar exercise, but expand your awareness outward. You are aware of your surface-level magic, yes? Force it to stretch to the rest of the room, to encounter the same type of magic on another.

Percy frowns skeptically but obeys Tom. He closes his eyes and breathes through his nose to centre himself, turning his attention to the shimmer of magic that has clung to his skin since he can remember. For a second, he luxuriates it in, enjoying the smooth feeling of his magic buzzing over the soft hairs on his arms. Then, without a strong idea of how to *force* his magic elsewhere, he tries to *push* with his magic so that it peels away from him and floats throughout the room.

It takes a few tries, but after a minute or two Percy finds to his surprise that he's succeeded. He has a sudden awareness of Alexander in the next bed, chatting softly through the hangings to Oliver. Percy's magic collides softly with Alexander's, and Alexander pauses for just a second, though he resumes relating his story to Oliver after only the barest hesitation.

The collision of his magic with Alexander's, however, is enough to send shivers down Percy's spine. He *feels* Alexander's magic, suddenly, feels it vividly in a way that he's never encountered before with another wizard, feels his magic measuring itself against Alexander's…

…and feels his magic winning.

Percy is stronger than Alexander, he suddenly realises, though without a clear understanding of why that may be so. The buzz in the back of Percy's teeth subsides as Alexander's magic accepts Percy's dominance, and Percy finds to his astonishment that his magic seems to flex and spread over Alexander's body as well, as if Alexander's prone form were merely an extension of Percy's body.

Keep practising, advises Tom when Percy relates this to him a few minutes later. ***An experienced wizard will be able to sense such an obvious intrusion. The trick is to merely release enough of your magic to sense whether your power is greater than the other wizard's.***

Indeed, Percy practises quite a lot over the next few weeks, extending his magic toward his classmates at supper, or in the Common Room, or most commonly in his dormitory bedroom at night. He finds this type of granular control over the direction of his magic to come quite naturally to him, and to his gratification he finds also that his magic is stronger than nearly all of his peers'.

(He does not risk the professors; indeed, the thought of Snape catching him measuring himself against the man makes Percy want to shudder in embarrassment).

Magic understands objective truth, says Tom, once, after one of Percy's attempts. ***If you are a stronger wizard than another, your magical cores will recognise that fact. In this way it is not arrogance for a strong wizard to attempt the Dark Arts; it is merely a natural extension of your will.***

Have you ever met anyone with a stronger magical core than you?

Not often, Tom replies. Percy waits an interminable amount of time for a response, and just when he is about to shut the diary, Tom adds one more line. ***Dumbledore, I suppose.***

Percy hesitates, not knowing what to say.

But I would hope that my future self, whoever he may be, remedied that situation in due time.

Percy thinks again of the Dark Lord stalking furiously down the halls of the Ministry and shudders. *I have no doubt that you did,* he writes, entirely truthfully, and is more than a little relieved when Tom does not answer back.

***

December 1992

Percy had told himself that it did not bother him to be passed up as Prefect. He'd even asked Professor McGonagall about it, and she had crisply informed him that skill in magic did not guarantee one a position aimed at overseeing one's peers. "I believe you would be competent at it, as you are at all things," she had said, raising a strict eyebrow so that the compliment did not fill him with as warm a glow as it could have. "But you have never been a social leader in your house, Mr. Weasley, and I believe you have no interest in becoming one."

It is true, to a point. He is not popular. If possible, he is even less popular in this timeline than he had been the first time. His tentative inroads with his housemates of his early years fell completely by the wayside as he began taking on more independent projects, and now he spends meaningful time merely with Landon and Myrtle. Landon is not a Prefect either, but he seems supremely unbothered by the fact. His latest project is to create a permanent Charm

—nevermind that permanence is antithetical to the entire discipline of Charms—and spends most of his time experimenting with various household charms to see if he can enchant them for perpetuity.

(Percy has a theory that Landon is so fascinated with Charms because he is far too wealthy to ever see how mundane most charms really are. Enchanting knitting needles to produce a sweater or animating pans to wash themselves may seem interesting until they are necessary skills for those unfortunate enough not to have the means to own a house elf).

Regardless, he is *not* bothered by the slight. Nevertheless, the sight of Henry with Percy's badge pinned gleaming to his chest awakens some monster in his chest that he is unable to suppress entirely.

(*It's not fair*, he writes childishly, angrily.

At one point we all must learn that the rules we think govern fairness rarely do, Tom replies coolly. ***You can either continue to play by them or make your own game entirely.***

He polishes his badge every night, Tom.

Tom suggests a Dark jinx that will tarnish the badge until he casts the counterspell and it takes every ounce of maturity in Percy to not immediately cast it—).

"Careful, Perce, you'll burn his hair off," Fred says in his ear, sliding in beside him at the table. George, naturally, is not far behind. In fact, the entire Quidditch team troops in, each sweatier than the last. Harry is sporting a bruise that Percy eyes but decides to let lie. Maybe whatever Harry is facing will toughen him up a bit. Merlin knows the Wizarding World will need Harry to be tough.

"I see all of the showers were taken," responds Percy huffily. He makes a production out of casting a clean air charm, but Fred only grins easily at him.

"You'll always be Perfect Prefect Percy to us," George coos. Percy pins him with his most damning glare but it has little effect.

Oliver actually grins conspiratorially at Percy, which is an odd feeling. "Henry is a bit of a berk with that thing, isn't he? Did you know he polishes it every night?"

Despite himself, Percy's lips twitch.

"That's what you think he's polishing," Fred retorts, waggling his eyebrows at Oliver to a general round of laughter. Harry goes red.

He takes the opportunity to speak to Harry. "Harry, I was wondering if you would be able to help me with something," he says. "I'm interested in learning a bit more about Parseltongue. Would you be able to help me?"

The rest of the Quidditch team looks on, interested, as Harry flushes an even deeper red. While some of the students continue to be frightened by Harry, the team seems, as a whole, content with the idea that their twelve year old star Seeker is not the Heir of Slytherin. Percy

rather thinks Oliver Wood would have become a Death Eater if the Dark Lord could catch a Snitch.

“I don’t know how much I can help,” Harry says. “To me, it’s as if I’m speaking English. I can’t actually tell if I’m speaking Parseltongue.”

Interesting. Percy retrieves the primer on Parseltongue that is in his bag and flips it open to the beginning exercises. “So you can’t read this?”

Harry peers at it (as do Fred, George, Oliver, and Angelina, crowding in a sweaty bunch over Percy’s shoulder). The book has a number of notations to indicate different types of hisses that the capable reader is meant to reproduce through various tongue positions and guttural noises.

“Er, no,” Harry says. “Is that meant to be a written version of Parseltongue? I’m not sure it can be written.”

“Can you say some common phrases?” Percy asks, producing the recording sphere he’d purchased at the beginning of the year. “Only, I’m trying to compare them to the primer.”

George snorts. “Only Percy would have a primer on Parseltongue.”

“Trying to talk to snakes, are we?” Fred chimes in with another eyebrow waggle.

Percy ignores them and looks at Harry. “I can’t do it unless there’s a snake,” the other boy admits.

Even more interesting. Some kind of innate ability? Percy thinks for a second and then closes the book, pointing to the snake on the front. “Is this sufficient?”

Harry looks at it and opens his mouth to speak, producing instead a hushed hiss.

Percy smiles. “Perfect.”

***

Percy realises quickly, of course, that the voice that Harry heard that night was the basilisk. Hopefully, the basilisk has gone back to wherever it lives; he doesn't think that Tom is possessing him, given that all of his hours are carefully accounted for, and nobody else has been Petrified.

(Percy has to give Fred and George a stern talking to. No, it is not funny to pretend Harry is the Heir of Slytherin, and yes, Ginny is upset by that kind of talk, so they could at the very least be mindful of their eleven year old sister).

That night, he risks bringing it up to Tom.

Have you ever heard of the Chamber of Secrets, Tom?

Tom's response seems cautious to Percy. Something in the way his words appear slowly, as if the diary is hesitating. ***Only rumours, why?***

I think someone tried to imitate opening the Chamber earlier this year, Percy writes back. *Nothing has happened since, but everyone still is talking about it.*

That happened during my time too. Do you know Rubeus Hagrid? He was expelled.

Percy bites the fingernail at his thumb and then decides on, *Hagrid*? *The groundskeeper? Doubtful. The Heir of Slytherin would be a powerful wizard. Not a half giant.*

Perhaps one of the pure blood students tried to pin it on him.

I'm worried they're going to close Hogwarts.

They won't. Dumbledore would rather die. They'll just arrest Hagrid.

I can't go home.

What is your home like?

Percy thinks of the Burrow, its overflowing of rooms and clamour and noise. *Lonely.*

You are not lonely at Hogwarts?

I'm not particularly popular, true. But I do not know how anyone could be truly lonely at Hogwarts. There's so much more here.

I know what you mean.

What is your home like?

Percy watches his words fade into the book. He's about to give up on a response when Tom's neat handwriting curls across the page.

Demeaning.

Your parents?

Not worth the ink to write about them. It is no matter: I certainly am.

I know it's an odd thing to admit to, but I've never liked the rhetoric around "blood," insofar as blood must be your family. I hardly feel like I belong to my family. Why should they define who I am?

I've always thought it's just a matter of magic, Tom replies. ***I think respect should come from magic, not blood.***

I agree. I want to be as powerful as I can.

Then, Percy does something that he hopes isn't tremendously stupid.

I cast my first Imperius. Just on a random second year. I wanted to see if I could do it.

And could you?

It was so much easier than I thought.

The reply is slow, but when it comes, Percy smiles. ***Do you want to learn some more magic?***

***

Before he knows it, it's the end of the term. Neither Snape nor McGonagall have achieved their goals; he has not yet completed the portraiture of potion, nor has he finished his Animagus transformation. Regardless, he is pleased with his progress in both of their sessions. Percy plans to make the Elixir for Gold over the break, when everyone is gone. As for McGonagall, Percy told her that he is going to transform the next time they meet, mistakes be damned. She'd laughed, but he'd meant it.

He spends a few very enjoyable days in Myrtle's bathroom brewing the Elixir. She assists him, enjoying the novelty of brewing again. Her bathroom is actually quite a good place to brew. Percy wonders absently if the Trio is still trying to make Polyjuice, and if so, where.

(He learns the answer to that question a few days later, when he escorts Hermione to the hospital wing, furry ears and all. He lied about which abandoned classroom he'd found her in, feeling a little guilty that he'd taken their spot. He'd snagged the rest of the Polyjuice too. Hermione really was very brilliant).

Tom, meanwhile, has given him quite a long list of spells and rituals to learn. He taught him a cleansing spell as well, the one he used at Hogwarts to mask signs of dark magic. Percy takes the list and masters it. *Know thy enemy*, he thinks to himself whenever he feels a frisson of doubt.

Finally, it's time to use the Elixir.

"Myrtle," Percy says seriously, warding the bathroom as fiercely as he can without causing an alarm, "What I'm about to show you, you cannot tell a single soul. Are you loyal to Dumbledore?"

Myrtle wrinkles her nose. "Why would I be?"

"If he, or any professor, or any student now or in the future ever asks, or pries, or whatever—you must lie to them, do you understand?"

Her expression turns delighted. "Are you finally telling me one of your secrets?"

He can't believe that he's doing this, but there's a small voice in his head that tells him that she deserves it. "Yes."

"I'll never tell, not now, not ever," she promised solemnly.

He pulls out the Philosopher's Stone.

Myrtle wasn't a Ravenclaw for nothing. She puts together the clues quickly. "That's what was in that last chamber," she says. "You went without me."

"Yes," he admits, waiting quietly for her judgement.

She flies at him, turning his insides to ice. Her version of a friendly swat. "You *prat*, why didn't you take me?"

"I didn't mean to go," he says, half lying. "I saw my brother, and I followed him to make sure he would stay out of trouble. In the meantime, I found this and took it."

"You could be immortal," she breathes, looping around his head in lazy curls. "You could stay here with me."

He gives her a long and steady look and she dips her head.

"No, I guess not," she says sadly. "You're looking, aren't you? For a way to free me?"

He hasn't been, and he feels a smidgeon of guilt. "Yes," he says anyway, mentally bumping up its priority on his to-do list. "I'm working on it, Myrtle, I promise."

She settles down comfortably. "Well, at least you'll be rich."

And rich he becomes.

(It is another of those memories he will cherish forever, one of those brushes with magic that leave the entire world glittering a little brighter, that make him stand a little straighter. This is magic of the type that fills his veins with innate power, that separates him from animals or Muggles. This magic—the twist of petals sprinkled into the gleaming potion, the gentle and steady Latin incantation, the twist and pop of as the elixir coalesces, the blood-red gleam of the Stone as he dips it into the Elixir—is, in a way he cannot entirely articulate, holy).

He will either need Aunt Muriel to take him to Gringotts or he will have to wait until the seventeenth birthday to open his own account. Until then, he decides to store the gold in his second trunk, the one that Tom had personally guided him through warding against all detection. It's a comfort to him, knowing that he can make more money whenever he needs to. For the first time, he is grateful that the Wizarding World continues to use real gold and silver for its coins. It will be very easy to deposit the gold into his account and withdraw Galleons.

He's not going to be stupid about it; at the very least, everyone knows that Weasleys are poor. He might be able to explain a new robe or a new cauldron on the largess of Aunt Muriel but he could hardly buy himself more than that.

It matters not. The money is to fund books, supplies. Not to have him compete with the Malfoys.

But for the first time in what is perhaps his entire life, Percy feels a tension inside of him uncoil. He has never had enough money to feel secure. Not during his time being underpaid at the Ministry, not during that year of peace after. Having that money tucked away feels exactly like he always imagined it would: calming, like the feeling of knowing all of his homework is completed several days before it's due. If this is how Landon and Henry feel, no wonder they can walk around with such calm assurance.

Now that he's felt this, he never wants to feel that anxiety of need ever again.

***

I tried the identity ritual on my new trunk. I can't really test it, of course, but it glowed the precise shade of cerulean the book indicated, and the ritual accepted my offering of hair.

I'm impressed with you, Ignatius. You're proving yourself.

Of course I am, Percy writes back. Ignatius is arrogant in a studied, casual way, simultaneously needy for Tom's approval. *Anyway, I reckon you're a good teacher.*

Percy hears the ghost of Tom's laugh in his ear. ***When I come back, you can be my right hand man,*** Tom says teasingly.

Merry Christmas, Tom, Percy writes back, unable to hide the wide grin of victory on his face.

Do you want to see something, Ignatius? I've been working on it for you. A little Christmas gift.

Percy hesitates.

But curiosity drives him forward. *Of course.*

Put your wand on the paper, Tom instructs.

Percy sets up a glowing timer meant to ring in thirty minutes. He writes a note that says, *If the timer is ringing, fetch Professor Snape.*

He takes a second to reassure himself: his Occlumency shields are up.

Then he turns and places his wand on the page.

***

Tom is undeniably handsome. It's his first thought, sneaking in somewhere amidst the shock of being pulled directly into the pages of the diary. The swirls of colour coalesce into Hogwarts from many years ago, the memory slightly toned sepia like an old photograph. They are in the corridor outside the Transfiguration classroom, or what will be the Transfiguration classroom in Percy's time. Tom is neatly dressed, wearing a green sweater, a collared shirt, and a black tie and trousers. He stands off to one side as a group of girls come down the corridor, their laughter jarring against the previous silence of the hall.

The girls do not notice Tom or Percy. Percy grips his wand more tightly and looks at Tom, wondering if he can acknowledge him. "Tom?"

He hears Tom's voice, cold and amused. ***It's a memory,*** it echoes in his head, and his voice is smooth like butter. ***I haven't yet figured out how to appear to you, but I thought this would do as well.***

Percy and Tom had looked into Pensieve magic together a few months ago. This is incredibly complicated magic, and once again Percy feels something like jealousy and awe simmer quietly in his stomach. Even a part of Tom's soul is capable of feats unheard of. *This is incredible*, he thinks.

***This is the first time I cast the Imperius*,** Tom reveals, and Percy inhales sharply. Something about the intimacy of Tom choosing this particular memory for Percy is jarring. If he ever needed proof that he is making progress with Tom, here it is.

Tom's voice echoes around his head, narrating the memory. ***I was scared,*** he admits, and the vulnerability in his voice shocks Percy to the very core. ***I thought I might be detected, but I was like you, Ignatius. I needed to test the limits of my own power.***

I didn't know you had any limits.

Tom laughs, and the sound is unlike anything Percy had imagined in his head while writing to Tom. ***Men like us seek to prove that is true.***

Tom has neatly combed dark hair, eyes that could kill, cheekbones that are high and imperious. Percy had seen him in photos, of course, but the limited selection had not captured his cold grace, the sinuous fluidity of his movements. He trails behind a girl, young and unknowing, quietly tracking her with his eyes.

Just like Percy, he casts the spell silently.

Percy can feel his pride and glee seep through the memory as the girl turns and begins walking the opposite way. Tom and Percy follow her all the way up to the Astronomy Tower, where she climbs over the railing and stands on the very edge. Her hair is loose and curling, her nose is long and straight, and she stares straight ahead unseeingly, unfazed by her proximity to her own death.

Part of him wants to scream and warn her. Had Tom brought him here for him to witness his first murder? Was it a reminder that no matter how playful Tom could be, that he is already a killer?

The other part of him is fascinated. Did she feel fear, standing on the edge beyond the railing? Could she process what was happening to her through the haze of the spell? Imperius gave the victim enough control to make common decisions. Would she be able to fight back if the order given meant certain death?

I could have made her jump, if I wanted to. Tom's voice appears in his head again, making him jump himself. ***How do you think it made me feel, Ignatius?***

He doesn't need to think to answer. He knows how it would make him feel. *Like you are standing on the edge yourself,* he thinks, watching the girl look over the railing. *But you know that if you were to jump, you could fly.*

I was right to trust you, Tom thinks, and his cold and high laughter follows Percy out of the memory.

He appears, gasping, in his room. His timer shows nine minutes remaining, and he hastily cancels it and then shreds the note to find Snape.

His heart is pounding wildly. He feels something like panic, something like elation, something like pride. Percy creeps open to the book and opens it to a blank page.

Nothing. Tom never initiates; he only responds.

Thank you, Percy writes.

We have so much ahead of us, Ignatius, Tom responds, and Percy slams the book closed.

EXPOSURE (3/3)

Chapter Notes

Ok, this one is pretty long. Probably should have posted in two parts, but oh well.

I'm glad you all like Tom. Lots to come. (Also, I'm laughing at how many of you immediately started shipping Tom/Percy).

CHAPTER SIX: EXPOSURE (3/3)

1992 — 1993 (Percy is 16 & 29, Harry is 12, Snape is 32, Ginny is 11, Tom is 16, and Lucius Malfoy is feeling a bit reckless)

January 1993

The rest of the break passes quickly. When the term begins, Professor McGonagall looks at him strangely. "Are you sick, Mr. Weasley?"

He blinks and shakes his head. Last night, he and Tom had stayed up very late, practicing Percy's awareness of magic. It's surprisingly taxing to hold a mental awareness for so long; he always feels very tired after those attempts.

"Tired," he says instead.

"I think we should postpone your attempt to transform another day," she says, the concern clear in her voice. "You look a bit peaky."

Percy scowls. "I know you don't think I can do it."

"That's not it at all, Mr. Weasley," McGonagall protests. "I have no doubt that as soon as you get over this fear of yours, you'll be able to transform. But it takes energy, focus."

"You don't think I have the focus," Percy says, a great irritation welling up inside him. He's irritated at himself, too. He should have been able to accomplish this by now.

Professor McGonagall gives him an unimpressed look. "You've never acted childish; don't start now, Mr. Weasley."

He forces himself to calm down. He needs to start getting more sleep. He can feel how irritable he is, just when he needs to be in control. Things with Tom are very delicate; it requires all of his attention, like balancing on the edge of a very tall drop.

"Let's try it," he agrees. "You're ready to call Madam Pomfrey?"

"As always, Mr. Weasley, I have informed her to be ready during our sessions. And as always, I remind you that it is better to achieve a failed first attempt at a transformation than not to try at all. You saw that we were able to care for Hermione Granger after her transfiguration incident. We will care for you too, and I promise never to speak of it to Professor Snape."

The humour in her voice is enough to snap him out of the remnants of his bad mood. He steels himself for possible pain and injury, as he does every time. Transforming, or at least attempting to, is like nothing he's ever felt. His latest strategy has been to compare it to Apparation, the only sensation close to that of transforming into an animal. Unluckily for Percy, he had been almost the last in his class to learn how to Apparate. The idea of fixing one's mind on somewhere intangible, having only one's own memory or perception to rely on, and then forcing one's body to disappear from the current state—it frightened him.

But you know how to Apparate, he counsels himself.

He starts with a grounding exercise that they've practiced, which is essentially glorified meditation. He becomes aware of his magic, flowing through his body, gathering at his core. He feels his limbs, slightly sore from the position he slept in last night. His head pounds irregularly; as he takes a second to breathe, he feels how heavy his eyes are. He must have had one of those nights where he doesn't fall into deep sleep and remains restless the entire night.

He gathers up his magic, feeling it gather in his palms, willing it down his spine. To force his magic to be both anchor and transformative force, he must be aware of it as active and controlled. He can use it, but he must allow it to use him too.

Deliberation, determination, destination. He imagines himself Apparating, and twists his body, but instead of thinking of his destination, he thinks only of his form.

And then, with a triumphant crack, he is a lynx.

From far above him, he hears McGonagall cry out in excitement and surprise.

"*Excellent*, Mr. Weasley! No sign of any deformities. Remember, we've discussed this when you transformed your nose and eyes. Your senses are different now. Don't move; let yourself become accustomed to your new space."

His limbs are not his own. His eyes are not his own. His weight is not his own.

And yet, indescribably, he feels at home in this body. He feels his magic, the same way that he feels it throughout the day. If he focuses, he can feel his core. It's in his stomach still, but his stomach is now in a very different place than it once was.

It simultaneously feels as if he's crouching on his hands and knees, and as if he's standing. The position is both awkward and natural. He takes a hesitant step, but out of instinct, he moves only his back leg, and he finds himself toppling over.

Professor McGonagall chuckles. "You're thinking too much," she advises him as he scrambles to recover. "If you must think, think of the studies we did of the lynx. Think of the hours we spent studying how cats walk."

Her voice is very loud. He twitches, becoming aware that he can hear many more sounds and he normally can. He can smell, too—he can smell her perfume, the cat hairs that she must have left on the floor. The room is bright, and as he swings his gaze around desperately, it feels as though the room is very small and very large.

When his breathing settles, he hesitantly takes another step, this time moving in a way that seems more natural to him.

"That's it, Mr. Weasley," Professor McGonagall says encouragingly. "I would recommend that you try and switch back soon. While you're with me, I'd like you to practice the transformations. You can practice the other mechanics on your own time, though I would ask that you inform at least one person what you are doing so they may fetch me if needed."

He nods his small head and focuses. The way back is easier; he knows what to expect. Suddenly he's panting in front of her, completely naked.

She conjures a robe and gives it to him without a hint of embarrassment. "This is why I told you to wear clothes that you do not care about," she says, chuckling. "Eventually you will learn to carry your clothes with you when you transform, but you'll probably lose quite a few pairs along the way."

His cheeks are warm but he cannot hide his enthusiasm. "*Thank you,* Professor McGonagall," he says with feeling, his earlier mood completely eradicated by his success.

"Thank you for trusting me and yourself," she responds. "I'm proud of you. And I'm relieved. I'm ready for us to go back to studying more advanced theory during our lessons."

"And you win the bet with Professor Snape."

Her smile is wicked. "Oh, yes."

***

Dear Perce,

Way to go! I'll embarrass you and tell you that I'm proud of you. I hope you told Mum and Dad. An Animagus—that's really something. I can admit I am extremely jealous. The next time I see you, you better tell me how to get started.

I hear you and Tonks have been writing a lot. Probably because I'm so pants at keeping in touch. I was sad that you didn't come to Egypt this Christmas to visit me and Bill, but you

had the whole brood with you at Hogwarts. I'm glad that you're fitting in better there. It's crazy to think that you're nearly done. What comes next for the great Percival Weasley?

I wanted to tell you something. I've met someone here. Don't worry; he's from England originally. If I ever get the guts to tell Mum, at least it'll coincide with me returning home. I told him about you and how you helped me figure some things out. I haven't heard from Tonks yet, but I imagine she'll say it's about time.

I know that you're still young, and you have quite a lot to do at Hogwarts without adding dating to the mix. But I have to say, Perce…there's something to what they say about having someone to lean on. It takes such a burden off you. With him I can be my whole self, as cheesy as that sounds. From what Bill says, he's chosen the alternate route of meeting as many girls as possible. But I've always felt that you and I are very similar, Percy. I want what I have for you too.

Anyway, maybe for your seventeenth birthday you could come and visit me with Tonks. If you book an international Portkey in advance, it's not too expensive. I can introduce you to D.

Again, three cheers for you, mate. How far you've come since you were a scrawny kid asking for extra lessons.

Cheers,

Charlie

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February 1993

Valentine's Day is a disaster. Ginny sends Harry a *singing valentine.* What possesses her to do that? Henry finally asks Mariana on a date, which was only slightly more tolerable of an ordeal. At least Henry's valentine had not involved a dwarf.

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March 1993

Even though Percy no longer spends so much time practicing his transformation, he finds to his disgust that he's as tired as ever. The days seem to slip away, between talking to Tom and completing his other obligations. Snape is particularly vindictive after losing to McGonagall, giving him increasingly more work to do during their sessions.

(An exchange he is not proud of:

“I’m *sorry* if I am not capable of stirring ten cauldrons simultaneously; my sincerest apologies for having a bloody headache!”

“And so he proves to be as weak as the rest of his sorry peers. A disappointment, but one I should have anticipated long ago. The error is mine, I must admit.”)

And, if he's being honest, he's spending quite a lot of time talking to Tom. Tom has shown him several of his memories by now, everything ranging from amusing recollections with his peers to him practicing more advanced magic. Percy tries to play Ignatius perfectly. He's always interested, always in awe, always carefully flattering. Every time he is deposited out of a memory he thanks Tom.

Tom isn't what he'd expected. Perhaps because the other boy is sixteen, not yet a hardened killer. He's charming, witty, shockingly arrogant. It's obvious to Percy how much he wants Ignatius' esteem. It's also obvious how lonely he is. Even when Tom shows him memories of him casually lounging at the head of a crowd, Percy can pick up on the feeling of isolation that looks behind his studied smile. None of these boys challenge him, not even the elder Greengrass, who looks just like a young Landon, or Abraxas Malfoy.

During these sessions, Percy gets to know the boys, or at least these reflected versions of them. Abraxas reminds him of Draco, or what Draco could be if he too matures into a smart young man with a cutting tone and a sly sense of humour. Abraxas very clearly has money and power; everything he does is underlaid with the calm confidence of one who knows the world is in his grasp. Tom, Percy soon surmises, resents this terribly—and yet, also seems slightly enthralled, tracking Abraxas with sharp, interested eyes.

Abraham Nott, meanwhile, is quiet, cruel, far more in line with what Percy would have expected from one of Tom's followers. Tom shows Percy memories from the early meetings of the Death Eaters, before they called themselves that, when they were just boys practicing Dark Magic in the privacy of the Forbidden Forest. Before Tom feared death, perhaps?

Not much before, if the Horcrux is anything to go by, Percy reminds himself. He cannot forget that Tom was a murderer at sixteen.

Tobias' uncle, Theodore, is quiet but firm, watching Tom with steady eyes. He would fade into the corners of the memory if Percy wasn't watching him carefully, interested in him for his ties to Landon and Tobias.

They call you Lord, Percy comments one day, watching Nott torture a small rabbit with a number of precise cutting charms. Abraxas, standing nearby, felled his with a simple but deadly strangulation charm. He looks aghast at Nott's dark glee. Percy almost expects him to wipe his hands on his robes or perform a cleaning spell.

He feels Tom's satisfaction purr through the memory. ***Yes***.

Why do they call you that?

Because they were made to kneel before me, and they know that.

Or perhaps you are made to stand before them.

Tom likes this thought, Percy can tell.

And you, Ignatius? What are you made to do?

Again, Percy answers instinctively. *Whatever it is that my Lord desires.*

***

The next day, Colin Creevey is brought to the hospital, Petrified.

***

Percy buries the diary in his second trunk. His heart is pounding; his head feels weak. Every hour had been accounted for. He looks at his journals: he keeps a careful tally of everything that he does. He'd known that Tom would try to possess him, but when he looks over his schedule, not a single minute is out of place.

Maybe the basilisk is just roaming around, Percy thinks, willing himself to stay calm. *After all, Ginny probably never let him back to the Chamber.*

The problem is, Percy has no idea how to control the basilisk either.

***

"Why can't we kill it, Professor?"

Snape stalks back and forth, thinking it over. "The Headmaster believes somebody is controlling it," he reveals. He's clearly stressed; he would not normally confide in Percy. After Colin came two other students, both sixth year Hufflepuffs, out for a late night rendezvous.

"He wants to draw him out. If we kill the basilisk, whoever is controlling him would presumably disappear from the castle," Percy completes in a dawning realization. Anger hits him next. It's the same as keeping the Philosopher's Stone in the castle. Dumbledore doesn't care about the other students; only about trapping Tom. "And the students?"

"Roosters in every corridor," Snape murmurs, stalking back and forth in front of his desk. "An awful racket, but worth the alternative."

"A curfew, enforced by the ghosts," Percy contributes. "They can't be killed by a basilisk."

Snape does not even insult the idea. Percy begins to feel concerned.

"All prefects and professors should travel with mirrors," he continues to himself.

"Then everyone would know what we were frightened of," Percy points out.

Snape gives him a dry look. "As if the roosters weren't a giveaway."

True. Anyway, the only person that could possibly be controlling the basilisk is Percy, and he certainly doesn't need roosters or mirrors to be tipped off to what is happening.

No, he counsels himself. It's not him. Once they catch the basilisk, the attacks will stop. It's probably just wandering through the pipes, hungry.

"The mandrakes won't be done until the end of term," Snape continues thoughtfully. "But we can begin to brew other potions."

"We think it's Him, then?" Percy dares to ask.

Snape smiles grimly. "If it's not, it's something close."

***

There's a monster in the school, Percy writes, his hand shaking. *It's attacked four students already.*

Mudbloods?

Three of them are, but one was half-blood.

The Heir probably made a mistake.

I don't know, Tom. I've been thinking about what the monster could be.

And?

I think it's a basilisk. That's what makes the most sense.

Full marks.

You knew?

I figured it out the first time, just like you are doing now.

But the thing is, I don't know how a basilisk could tell who's a Mudblood.

He won't hurt you.

How do you know?

Because you're with me.

***

Another attack, and then another. Percy locks the diary away, but he finds it emerging anyway, appearing on his desk as if it has a mind of his own.

The words sit on his tongue. *I am being possessed*. He screams it in his head, wishing that his shields were less strong, that Snape would have cause to look in his mind. His classmates ask him if he's sick and he lies smoothly, his tongue not his own. Sometimes, he hears Tom's laugh in his head. Sometimes he hears Tom's voice in his voice, snapping at Henry when he teases Percy about his very pretty Charms partner or answering Lockhart's questions with more bite than Percy would have dared. Sometimes he dreams and his dreams are not his own.

His only solace is that Tom continues to call him Ignatius. He is not actually in his head, but somewhere in between his shields and his mind, lingering. Tom doesn't question that Ignatius would know Occlumency. Who wouldn't want to protect their mind?

What's happening to me? Percy asks one day, desperate, the ink staining his fingers as he scrabbles for purchase at the edges of the book.

You are helping me, Tom says soothingly. ***We talked about this, remember? I'm going to come back, and we're going to rule the world together.***

Are you going to kill me, Tom?

A dark laugh. ***I need you. You are the only one that I can trust.***

And Percy drowns.

***

Hagrid is taken away. Myrtle sobs, the bathroom brimming with cold, slimy water. Percy blinks at her from the doorway and she screams at him to *get out*, diving into the sink.

He finds himself in her bathroom again and again, but she refuses to speak to him.

The days slide together—

He snaps at Ginny, and her chin trembles;

He does not complete the assignment for Transfiguration tutelage, and McGonagall begins to look at him with increasing concern;

Snape slides into his mind again and again, and he feels his shields flicker and begin to give out;

Landon looks taken aback, affronted: *I thought we were friends again, but you're as much as a prat as usual*;

His Patronus does not even produce the normal mist;

He stares at Myrtle with wide eyes but cannot hear what she is saying;

And Petrified bodies pile up in the Hospital Wing.

***

(*Tom—Henry, it's Henry, he's in the hospital wing. He's a pureblood, Tom!*

Haven't we agreed blood is irrelevant? There is only power and respect and those who lack both. Don't lie to me; you're pleased he's out of your way.

Tom, I know it's you controlling the basilisk. Somebody is going to die.

You can save them. You must do what I say. We need an innocent, and then all will return to normal.)

***

"Mr. Weasley," McGonagall says. "Are you feeling well?"

("Weasley," Snape says. "If you're not going to concentrate, don't bother to waste my time."

"I think I'm—"

"Weasley? Weasley?")

“Percy,” Ginny says nervously. He blinks at her blearily. In the corner of his mind that still belongs to himself, he notes how she gathers up her courage and wears it in the sharp lines of her shoulders. “Did you steal my diary?”

He becomes slowly aware that he is in the Hospital Wing.

“Why would I steal your diary?”

She leans in closer. “Are you talking to Tom?”

He cannot answer.

He draws his wand.

***

When Percy awakens in the Chamber, his first thought, confusedly rolling around in his mind, is that it is so very warm, an odd, damp humidity that sticks to his chest and makes him gasp for breath as he sits up. It takes him several seconds to come to himself and realise that Tom is to his left, nearly like a ghost, his form flickering in the light. He's examining the diary with interest.

"Are you going to kill me?" Percy rasps, his chest still tight.

"No, although you did lie to me," Tom says without missing a beat. He raises a groomed eyebrow. "*Gryffindor*, really?"

Percy looks at his robes and sees his very red and gold tie. He responds on instinct, his mouth moving before his brain can wade through the damp fog surrounding it: "Well, when you said you were a Slytherin, I thought I should lie."

"One day, we'll have to see what else you've lied about," Tom says, continuing to flip pages. "And if you have lied, I will kill you."

He feels a sharp pang of fear that does little to abate his simmering, ongoing terror. With an immense effort, he sees a chink in the wall of anxiety that surrounds him and claws at it with all of his strength. A joke. He needs a joke. Tom likes his sense of humour, or is at least distracted by it, and Percy most definitely needs a distraction. "Well, I did lie about one thing,” he says as he pulls himself to his knees, his head spinning.

"Do tell,” says Tom coldly, and Percy can see the tension in the lines of his ghostly back.

"I think you could have a better taste in followers." He mimics Tom's earlier voice, hoping this will land. "*Nott*, really?"

Tom bursts out laughing, and even though Percy is on the ground aching, the sound makes him smile, too. "Slim pickings that year," Tom says, tossing Percy his wand. If he'd had any doubts about Tom's trust in him, the other boy returning his wand abates them entirely. "Now, we've got to finish the ritual."

"What ritual?" Percy asks, his stomach suddenly squeezing again.

"Well, ritual is not precisely the right word," Tom muses. "Remember our discussion? A ritual is a form of bound magic, where one binds one's magic into a form, to be utilised in a specific way. That's not exactly what we're doing here."

Percy can't remember that argument, and it chills him. "When did we decide that?"

Tom throws him an amused glance. "Don't tell me you've forgotten."

With some difficulty, Percy stands. The wrap of his fingers around his wand comforts him. "To be honest, much of the last few months is a blur," Percy admits.

Tom purses his lips. "I must have overdone some of the possession, then."

"*Possession?"* Percy tries to sound appropriately outraged, casting his mind around for some sort of strategy. He knows he is in the Chamber of Secrets; it seems familiar to him, for some reason, though he can't seem to remember if he'd ever been here before.

Tom still does not look at him. He is flipping through the pages of the diary, as if looking for something. "Do you really not remember your plan? It was your idea."

"Remind me, please, Tom," Percy says, striving to keep his voice even. "This is a bit new to me."

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Tom chuckles. Percy's mind whirs: can he summon a ghost? An elf?

"We knew I needed magic to escape the diary," Tom lectures Percy. "An innocent. You said you would bring me one."

"I did?" Percy has no memory of this—no memory of the ritual, nor of volunteering somebody to be sacrificed. "And the basilisk?"

Tom chuckles again. "You've forgotten that too? Oh, that was quite fun! We'll have to do it again sometime. I even taught you a bit of Parseltongue. You kept trying to warn them, though. A bit squeamish of you, really. I know it can be—overwhelming, your first murder, but once you've killed one person, you see how easy it is. This summer, we'll have to practise."

Percy makes a show of looking around him. "Where is the beast? Should I close my eyes?"

"She's asleep," Tom says with a dismissive wave of his hand. His eyes brighten. "So you don't remember the Chamber either."

Percy eyes the damp cavern doubtfully.

"Oh, we'll have so much to explore," Tom says eagerly. "Come. Before you, there was another girl—a first year, I think. She's quite magically powerful, all things considered. Not a Mudblood, but the daughter of a blood traitor, so I shan't expect she'll be missed."

Percy reels in horror as he numbly follows Tom. There, crumpled under the large, imposing head of Salazar Slytherin is Ginny. He'd missed her when he'd looked around earlier; she is so small, and so pale, that he'd passed over her without recognition.

Ginny.

Nothing he had done would save her, in the end. In fact, perhaps this would make it even worse; would Harry and Ron still come to save her? Could Percy save her without Tom turning on them both?

The longer he's awake and under the control of his own mind, the more memories begin to creep in. He can remember being in this Chamber before. He remembers his shock at the giant bust of Slytherin, and his comment about *compensating for something?* that had made Tom, barely more than a ghost beside him, lecture him on respecting one's elders. The past months are a jumble; he isn't even sure what month it is now, or what he'd been doing before he'd woken up next to Tom. He tries to delve into his head but his shelves are out of order, the books on each shelf waterlogged and mis-categorised, and the light outside his mental library dim and murky.

One thing is abundantly clear: he cannot complete the ritual. He *will* save Ginny. He will have to come up with an excuse, or some way to sabotage it. For now, the best he can do is stall.

"Did we talk about Voldemort?"

A look of stone crawls across Tom's face. "Voldemort?"

Percy keeps talking, praying this is the right thing to say. "I guess there was one other thing I didn't tell you," he says nervously.

"Clearly." When he tries, Tom's sarcasm is as good as Snape's.

Percy reminds himself that Tom cannot kill him if he wants to finish the ritual. Nobody will find the book down here; Percy is his last chance. "This might be after your time, but I think...I think you might be a Dark Lord called Voldemort."

"And why would you say that?"

Percy gulps. His throat is impossibly dry. "Voldemort was a Dark wizard before I was born," Percy says. "He's incredibly feared, even now. Everyone refers to him as *He Who Must Not Be Named.*"

"And yet I hear his name from your throat."

Percy grins nervously. "I do fear him," he says, completely honestly. "But I don't think he would call himself Voldemort because he wants to be called *He Who Must Not Be Named*. I think he would want his name to be known. I use it as a term of respect."

"And you think I may be he?" Tom says neutrally. Percy has not been able to determine, at least in this half-befuddled state, whether Tom thinks of himself already as Lord Voldemort—but he imagines he will begin to call himself by the name soon. His followers already whisper *my Lord*.

"Yes," Percy says. "Many of your followers are his followers—Abraxas, Abraham. They call him the Dark Lord. He is incredibly powerful, very skilled in Dark Magic; and I cannot imagine there is another man your age you would allow to match you. It has to be you."

Even now, even in his fear, Percy can tell when he pleases Tom. It warms him, just marginally, and gives him feeling in the tips of his fingers and toes, which had gone numb.

Tom continues to flip slowly through the diary. "What happened to this Voldemort?"

"He is said to have been killed," Percy answers carefully. "A rebounded spell. There was a boy, Harry Potter."

"The Boy Who Lived," completes Tom, an ugly look crossing his face.

Yes, Ginny would have told Tom all about Harry.

"Yes," Percy says. "But I don't believe the rumours."

"Why not?"

Percy gestures to Tom. Honesty, here, is key—Percy's memories of the last few months are slowly trickling in, but Percy *knows* Tom by now, knows him deep inside, knows instinctively what Tom wants to hear. (Percy does not allow himself to consider what that may mean). "Because of you," he says simply. "You wouldn't let an infant kill you. Look at you now; you are him, even if you do not know it yet. Voldemort means *flight from death*, you know. You would know how to take flight, even off the edge of the Astronomy Tower."

Tom smiles and it is all teeth. "Very good, Ignatius," he says softly, and his voice is almost warm. "If you pass me your wand, I can show you, but I discovered a rather clever anagram one day. Think of my name: Tom Marvelo Riddle. *I am Lord Voldemort.* Voldemort is my past, my present, and my future; *our* future. We will rebuild together and we will *rule*."

"Yes," Percy says, sneaking another glance at Ginny. She is breathing, if only barely. Where is her wand? Percy casts his mind back but he cannot remember what core her wand is. He'll have to hope it works for him. "And the girl?"

"She had my diary before you," Tom says dismissively, examining Percy's wand. "She says she found it in her things. *Such* a bore; I was relieved when you stole it from her." Tom imitates her voice, high and whining. "Tom, nobody likes me. Tom, even my brothers don't sit with me at dinner. Tom, Harry Potter doesn't know I exist!"

Percy winces. To hear that Ginny still felt so lonely, so isolated, even after he tried his best to watch her is demoralising at best.

First things first, he tells himself sharply, and with practice of many years, shoves away his guilt. He's proud that his voice does not crack when he asks, "And she has to die?"

Tom shrugs and spares her a brief glance. "We just need her magic, I suppose. But to kill her would be the greater kindness, I think. Imagine, living without magic. I'd rather die."

Percy swallows around a lump in his throat and walks away from Ginny, not wanting Tom to see any resemblance between them. He trails his fingers idly against the cold stone of the statue and tries to keep his desperation under control. If he had to choose between Ginny and the plan—

If he has to *choose* —

"The Chamber is rather draughty," he comments, peering behind the statue. Myrtle wiggles her fingers at him, and he barely contains a gasp of surprise. She must have followed them; thank *Merlin* that Myrtle is so nosy, so convinced of her own infallibility.

She has the sense to stay in the shadows caused by the curve of Slytherin's imposing chin. He isn't sure what good she will be able to do—perhaps she should just go for help; Snape, McGonagall, Dumbledore?—but he is, just barely, strengthened by her chilly presence.

"Intruders," Tom says suddenly, his voice suddenly cold and remote. Percy turns in a panicked flash to see him cocking his head like an animal. Percy instinctively moves to shield Myrtle but Tom's gaze is focused at a different tunnel, presumably the entrance. "Hide," he commands, and Percy steps to the side of the statue in relief. His wandless Disillusionment Charm is not excellent, but it is at least adequate, and he welcomes the slimy egg feeling with relief.

"Percy, what is going on?" Myrtle breathes in his ear. He is pressed so closely to her it feels like he is underwater.

"Tom," he mouths, not daring to make a sound.

The boy—shade; diary; Horcrux; soul?—in question is twirling Percy's wand, staring with studied casualness at the entrance. Despite his order for Percy to conceal himself, he merely steps into a shadow and waits for whatever noise he'd heard to materialise.

There's a quiet hissing noise, a loud creak as the circular door whines open, and all three members of the Golden Trio cautiously step into the Chamber.

Percy would groan, if he would dare make sound. His panic is so intense that he finds he's able to sidestep it all entirely and face the facts with a detached realism. Almost certainly someone is going to die. The real question is, who? Certainly not Harry, but it cannot be Ron or Ginny, and he can't consign Hermione to death (although, apparently, he prevented her Petrification). Does that leave Percy?

Though part of him wants to immediately put himself between Tom and the Trio, Percy waits in the shadows. Tom is looking at Harry very hungrily. He must know somehow that Harry is the Boy Who Lived. Maybe they can sense each other; maybe their souls have some sort of resonance. Maybe Ginny somehow provided a picture. Tom won't kill Harry, not without speaking to him first.

Ron spots Ginny immediately (unlike Percy, who had to be led to his sister by Tom, because he is an utterly useless brother and ought to be ashamed of himself, something he will only think about if he makes it through this alive). He sprints to her and drops to his knees beside her, his wand rolling by his side. Percy immediately zeros in on it but it's cracked and useless. Why are his brothers so *unhelpful?* Why won't they ever *learn* to take care of their things? Does Ron think they have the Galleons for him to break his wand in his second year of Hogwarts? What is his plan for exams?

Focus, he tells himself, not liking the way his thoughts are verging on hysteria. Ron may not even survive for his exams.

Hermione follows behind but more cautiously. She's staring around her with narrowed eyes, putting together the symbolism. "Harry," she says slowly, her voice high with fear as she takes in the statue of Salazar Slytherin. Good. Percy would not say that Salazar Slytherin was a particularly subtle man. "We've got to go immediately. Is Ginny here?"

"She's fainted or something," Ron says, clutching at Ginny's hand. "Oh, Ginny. Mum'll kill me if I let anything happen to you."

"What's wrong with her?" Harry asks urgently. Even though there isn't a chance in hell that Tom will let the three go, Percy can't help but twist his fingers in agitation. *Go*, he commands them. *Take Ginny and go.*

"We've got to take her to the hospital wing," Ron says. "C'mon Harry, give me a hand."

The mood in the air changes as Harry spots Tom. Percy sucks in a breath despite himself as Harry begins to take slow, careful steps toward Tom, as if pulled by a charm or an invisible string, an expression on his twelve year old face that looks beyond Harry's years.

(Does Harry *recognise* Tom?)

"She won't wake," Tom says, stepping out of the shadows, and the Tom that Percy's come to know—arrogant, witty, and cruel but entirely believable as a precocious sixteen year old—is gone, replaced by a cold and calculating façade. Percy presses himself more tightly to Myrtle, whose chilly mist is grounding and familiar.

"What did you do to her?" Harry demands. Behind him, Ron and Hermione draw their wands. Myrtle shifts uncomfortably but does not move.

"She did it to herself," Tom corrects. He smiles thinly. "Little Ginny Weasley, so lonely, so poor. She couldn't wait to help me. She said it would be an *honour*."

Percy flinches, recognizing his own words, words he'd thought were clever and calculating. They sound different, delivered in Tom's smooth tones. They make him sound pathetic.

Harry is undeterred. "Who are you?"

Tom's eyes flicker to Harry's scar. He has no attention to spare for Ron, Hermione. Even Percy is allowed to remain in the shadows, hidden from sight. No, Tom's entire attention is fixated on Harry—as Harry's is on Tom, as if they exist in their own small circle, shut out from everyone else.

Looking at Harry, small with knobbly knees, Percy cannot help but wonder for the millionth time why this unassuming boy is chosen to be hero. There is a prophecy, yes, but why Harry? He is not a worthy opponent for Tom; he knows little of magic, he knows less of power. He is a *child*, whereas Tom, despite his age, is so clearly a wizard of another calibre. Tom ought to oppose someone like Dumbledore, or even McGonagall or Snape. That would be more fair, more balanced, more understandable.

Hermione jerks her head toward the door and her and Ron begin to slowly inch toward the exit. Tom lets them; no doubt he is aware of their every movement.

"You are Harry Potter," Tom says, and the flat tone of his voice informs Percy that Tom's thoughts are running alongside Percy's own, and Tom does not like what he sees. "You are nothing but a boy."

Harry lifts his chin stubbornly. "And you are nothing but a ghost."

Tom smiles. It is a smile that Percy suddenly recognises: the smile of a snake acknowledging that a mouse has said something clever, before the snake lunges. Percy has been the recipient of it, he remembers faintly, more than once.

Percy bites his lip and tries desperately to force his mind past the frozen indecision encircling his thoughts. (Perhaps this is why Harry is the hero, he notes distantly. Twelve years old and his chin held high as he insults the most dangerous man of their time).

The diary. He has to get to the diary. Tom isn't holding it, but from Percy's vantage point he cannot see where Tom may have discarded it. He doesn't know if he'll be able to summon it wandlessly without a direct line of sight. Oh, Snape had *warned* him about this. Why hadn't he become more proficient in wandless magic? If he survives this, wandless magic is getting promoted to the very top of his to-do list.

"I am no ghost, Harry Potter," Tom says. He raises Percy's wand and fiery letters unroll themselves, an anagram that causes all three members of the Golden Trio to gasp as one. "I am your nightmare, come to life."

(Despite himself, Percy has to roll his eyes. There is the sixteen year old that he has met over the past year).

"You were the one that opened the Chamber," Hermione accuses from behind Harry, her voice high but firm.

Tom gives her a dismissive glance. "And you are a Mudblood that escaped the basilisk," he says with a shrug. "I am delighted to inform you that you shall have another chance."

Percy's eyes widen. If Tom is going to summon the basilisk, the probability that all five of them will die increases dramatically. He will have to make a move. He is not sure yet exactly what that move will be—that depends on what Tom and Harry do, locked in their inescapable dance—but nevertheless he will have to make a move.

He turns to whisper to Myrtle, but she is not behind him. Well. Add one rogue ghost to the mix and the probability of success is, well, incalculable.

Tom hisses, loud and guttural, the sound raising the hairs on Percy's neck. The statue that Percy is pressed against begins to rumble, creaking open, but he flattens himself more desperately against it as all eyes swing to his position.

"We can't meet its eyes," Hermione yelps, and from somewhere in the depths of her pockets she retrieves a small compact mirror. Percy cannot help but admire her preparation, even as he searches his mind for a spell to conjure or transfigure a pair of mirrored glasses. A modified Ocularis, perhaps? He tries to ignore the vibrations from the statue and focus on the academic problem of saving his life.

Ron gulps and grips his broken wand tightly, moving his body to shield Ginny. "The entrance is behind us," he says, nodding resolutely. "Close your eyes and walk backward."

Harry doesn't move, even as his friends close their eyes and take careful steps back. Instead he hisses something back, something desperate and urgent, but Tom only laughs delightedly.

"Interesting," he says, his grin predatory. "You are like me."

"I am *nothing* like you," Harry cries. "Call it off right now, Riddle."

"If you are like me, you can control her," Tom returns, twirling Percy's wand casually in his fingers. "Go on, Harry. Save your friends."

The basilisk slithers out in all of her glory: horned head rearing high, a flash of sharp fangs. Percy is close enough to see his terrified reflection in her gleaming scales, to smell the putrid stench of blood emanating from her giant body. The capacity for movement, for thought, leaves him as he shrinks into his hiding place, struck dumb by the majesty and terror of the basilisk.

Even Harry looks uncertain. He grips his wand tighter and closes his eyes. "Run," he shouts, and all three of them turn and scramble desperately toward the entrance, towing Ginny between them.

Tom chuckles darkly and hisses a command. The round entrance to the Chamber begins to slide shut agonisingly slowly, the hiss and screech of stone sliding over itself echoing through the Chamber.

The basilisk zeroes in on the three children, but a word from Tom stops it from lunging. Instead it bows its head to Tom's spectre, allowing the Horcrux to thread his fingers through the horns almost tenderly. Tom has long, delicate fingers, and Percy finds himself watching him close them gently over the basilisk's fearsome visage.

"I'll give you a fighting chance," Tom says magnanimously. "You defeated me once, Harry Potter. Let us see you do it again."

Percy takes the opportunity to inch out of his hiding place, hopefully protected by his Disillusionment Charm. He doesn't know what Tom thinks, whether he expects Percy to come to his rescue and stay hidden. He cannot count on Tom telling the basilisk to ignore Percy but he hopes the other boy's preoccupation with Harry will serve as a necessary distraction.

Keeping his body flattened against the cold stone, he crosses the front of Slytherin's face, ignoring the now-open mouth—although, really, he has to wonder as to whether in Slytherin's time the image of a snake emerging from his mouth held the same connotations as they might today, Dark Mark notwithstanding—until he can dip back into the shadows on the other side of the face. From here, he can see the diary laying open on the floor, and the glimmer above it that suggests Myrtle is trying unsuccessfully to scoop it up.

"Accio," he whispers as quietly as he can, stretching out his fingers. The diary trembles—Tom glances back but seems content to ignore whatever Percy is doing—and Percy grits his teeth, concentrating. Destination, determination, deliberation. *"ACCIO!"*

The diary flies into his hand with a reassuring thud. He holds it tightly, flipping briefly through the pages to determine that, aside from being a bit damp, it looks the same as normal.

Myrtle's chill permeates him, though she dares not reveal herself. Percy worries his lip and then digs in his pocket for his emergency quill. He flips open to the first page and writes, *Tom, what are you doing?*

As he'd predicted, Tom is still able to respond. His dark, confident writing fills the page, still straight and even despite the fact that he is goading a basilisk to kill his worst enemy. ***I know who you are, Percy***, he writes back, and Percy freezes in his spot. Tom continues. ***I shan't hurt your sister, vapid as she may be. I take it this is your brother as well?***

Of course Tom knows, Percy realises with a dawning set of horror. How could he not? How could Tom have possessed him for months without seeing Percy's name on his assignments or hear his brothers greet him in the halls? Of course he knows, but why has he not yet killed Percy?

I understand despising your family, Percy**,** Tom says gently, crooning, even as he hisses a cold command for the basilisk to lunge, jaws snapping, at the back of the Trio's robes. ***I was hoping you may let me rid you of them, one by one, but I understand you are still weak. You are not yet ready to take hold of your destiny.***

My destiny? Percy writes with trembling hands.

Tom smiles, and Percy can see it even from here, tucked behind the statue of Salazar Slytherin. ***You will serve me,*** he writes. ***We will rise together.***

So you always meant to use Harry for the ritual.

Of course, Tom responds, as if affronted. ***I shall not take the privilege of ridding yourself of your family from you, Percy. I have told the basilisk only to scare your brother and that Mudblood friend of his. Harry shall be my only conquest.***

Percy is relieved, though he probably ought to be ashamed of himself for thinking so. He leaves the diary open, in case Tom wishes to convey another message to him.

Myrtle, in his ear. "What the *fuck*?" She hisses, her voice high-pitched and frightened.

He looks up with wide eyes, having forgotten she was there, invisible. He does not want to risk speaking to her; he has to hope she trusts him, though he doubts she will.

He knows that she leaves him when the back of his neck becomes warmer. Percy grips the diary tighter, watching with wide eyes as Tom conducts the basilisk to neatly separate Harry from the others, pinning him against one wall. Ron and Hermione have opened their eyes and are shouting, their wands out, but Harry keeps his pinned shut, perhaps sensing the brutal dance of the basilisk in front of him, her great neck waving to her own invisible music as she delights in the seconds before the kill.

Harry is hissing furiously, perhaps threatening, perhaps cajoling, perhaps pleading, and Tom hisses back, the look of fond amusement still dancing in his eyes. Percy is struck by how similar they look, matching heads of dark hair, light eyes flashing.

"Get away from him!" Ron shouts, and Hermione sends a spell at Tom. It dissolves against the shield that Tom had undoubtedly already erected, and the two pause. They are only twelve; they probably do not even know that shield spells exist. (Again, in that absent, distant part of Percy's mind, he thinks to himself that he really ought to help the Trio learn some useful spells).

Tom turns with a scowl. With frantic fingers, Percy writes, *Please,* and so the spell that Tom sends to them is merely colored red. They crumple to the ground, their entertainment value exhausted.

Harry twitches, nearly opening his eyes, but manages to keep them shut. "Let them *go,* Riddle! They have nothing to do with this!"

"You're right, dear Harry," agrees Tom, taking a careful step toward the boy. "This is between you and me. They shall not be harmed if you give yourself up; you have my word."

Harry hesitates. There is no Ron or Hermione to shout at him, to tell him not to offer up his own life. "Do you promise?"

Don't listen to him, Percy begs, his stomach solidifying into ice. Although, perhaps Tom had given Harry this opportunity the first time; perhaps Harry had agreed to die to let Ginny live.

Did this *have* to happen? Maybe some magic is born here, something that comes back to help Harry later.

(Percy should have just kidnapped Harry, *his* Harry, and forced him to drink some Veritaserum. For Percy to send himself back over a decade in time, arrogant enough to believe he could put together a mystery with only bits and pieces of clues, was quite frankly the most stupid thing Percy had ever done, and he could kick himself for it now).

“Of course,” Tom says gently, but suddenly Myrtle blazes into being, furious, directly in between the basilisk and Harry.

“Don’t you touch him,” she says fiercely, her voice barely shaking. Percy closes his eyes for the briefest of seconds, hoping desperately that Myrtle is able to escape unscathed.

Tom blinks at her, his composure startled, if only for the hint of a second. “Who are you?”

Myrtle looks at him with disgust. “I remember you, Tom Riddle, even if you do not remember me. You set your nasty monster on me”

Tom recovers quickly. “Myrtle, dear Myrtle,” he says soothingly. “I never meant to kill you.”

Myrtle’s laugh is high and wild. “Don’t lie to me, dear Tom,” she mocks him. Harry, sensibly, takes the opportunity to begin creeping sideways away from the basilisk, his eyes still screwed shut. “Why would you care about Mudblood Myrtle? You chose me to be your first victim.”

Tom narrows his eyes. “I didn’t *choose* you,” he says dismissively, though Percy can tell by the sudden flush on the back of his neck that he is angry. “I barely knew you. You were just a pathetic little Mudblood in the wrong place at the wrong time. Your death meant *nothing*.”

“It will mean something if I prevent you from coming back,” Myrtle says, and in the back of his mind Percy is suddenly, fiercely proud of her, as idiotic as she is being. It strikes him, suddenly, looking at Myrtle's form next to Tom's, how similar they look too; both sixteen, both shades of who they once were, both years out of their time, both a fraction of their souls.

“Get out of my way, silly girl,” Tom spits out, and he turns and hisses a command at the basilisk, still weaving strange patterns into the air with her head.

The basilisk lunges but so does Myrtle. The sensation of a ghost passing through it must be as strange for the snake as it is for Percy and so the basilisk aborts the gesture before she makes contact with Harry. Harry opens his eyes, perhaps sensing how close he was to death, but the basilisk is distracted with Myrtle, snapping her jaws uselessly at Myrtle’s insubstantial form.

“Even if you kill me, it won’t matter,” yells Harry, perhaps to distract Tom, or perhaps because he means to die with heroics. “You’ll never be able to return to power, not while Dumbledore is at Hogwarts.”

Tom ignores him, continuing to shout instructions at the basilisk that the basilisk ignores, intent on crushing Myrtle with her dangerous fangs. Myrtle flips and twists through the air,

just out of reach of the basilisk, her eyes gleaming behind her glasses. She clenches her fists and Percy's feet begin to feel wet as the water that Myrtle has such a strong affinity with begins to pool on the floor.

Harry continues. "Dumbledore is the greatest wizard that ever lived," he yells tauntingly, even as he begins to slide out from his position pressed against the stone wall. "You're nothing but a ghost."

"Oh, for Merlin's sake," Tom bites out before issuing a sharp command at the basilisk, who swings its great head around to face Harry, whose green eyes are squinted defiantly at Tom. Harry crumples to the ground and Percy cannot help but yelp in fear.

Myrtle hangs in the air, still and unmoving.

For five long heartbeats, both Tom and Percy look disbelievingly at Harry, crumpled on the floor. The Chamber is suddenly very quiet, the only sound the basilisk's great form sliding over the wet tiles as it curls in on itself, its sinuous neck twisting.

"Tom," Percy gasps, stumbling out of his hiding space into the sudden silence. "*Tom."*

"Petrified," Tom says, walking over to nudge Harry's frozen form with his foot. "I think he should still work in the ritual, though."

Petrified?

Myrtle must have saved him, Percy realises, staring at how unnaturally still Myrtle is, one hand still outstretched, her face twisted into an ugly sneer. Poor Myrtle, felled twice by the same basilisk. His stomach drops away, and he suddenly has trouble breathing. Myrtle—Myrtle cannot be *dead*, she already is dead. Can be mourn for the same ghost twice? What is he going to do about Myrtle? Had he killed her, as capably as Tom?

Tom turns on Percy, his face bright and exhilarated. "So much for the Boy Who Lived, hmm?"

Percy cannot say anything. He can only hold the diary mutely, trying to process the crumpled bodies of Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, the frozen bodies of Harry and Myrtle. How had he made such a tremendous cock-up of this entire venture?

A caw makes them both look up, and Percy numbly recognises the brilliant plumage of Dumbledore's phoenix. Dumbledore himself is likely not far behind. *Good*, Percy thinks with an overwhelming sense of relief. He tried to do this himself; he tried to save the world himself; but he is no hero. He could not even make it past the first act. Dumbledore will have to take control of it now. All Percy can do is stall until the wizard arrives.

"What nonsense is this?" Tom says scathingly. Fawkes drops something, some folded piece of fabric, that falls between Percy and Tom.

It's the Sorting Hat.

For one wild second, Percy thinks about lunging for it, about a sword encrusted with jewels.

But he is no hero. He is no basilisk-slayer.

Tom snorts, kicking aside the Sorting Hat. “Perfect,” he mutters, rolling his eyes. “Not even a *useful* artefact.”

Fawkes lands on Harry’s body, and Percy feels hope swell up inside of him. Maybe he will revitalise Harry—

— but no, he takes off again and swoops in the air, letting loose a mournful cry that makes Percy want to sit and weep.

“Shut up, you blasted bird,” Tom says irritably, snapping a command at the basilisk, who begins to track Fawkes’ journey around the chamber with its great, yellow eyes. “I suppose this means Dumbledore is on his way. Bloody perfect. Percy, let’s go. Leave your brother, Dumbledore will find him and take him to the Hospital Wing. Let’s get Potter.”

The basilisk lunges at Fawkes but Fawkes dodges, turning to launch a counter-attack, his talons extended. The two ancient animals orient themselves around each other, Fawkes avoiding the snake’s gleaming fangs, the basilisk avoiding the bird’s sharp claws.

“We *really* do not have time for this,” Tom groans, striding toward the basilisk. Just like when she was tracking Myrtle, the basilisk seems to ignore whatever hold Tom has over her, hissing and snapping at Fawkes, who soon becomes a blur of red and gold.

And suddenly Fawkes caws triumphantly, having darted in to land a blow on the basilisk’s left eye. The basilisk rears its head back, its hiss a wounded cry, and Tom shouts at it with a thunderous voice.

Cowed, the basilisk ducks its head, blood leaking slowly to the ground.

Fawkes lands on the statue, right above Percy. He hopes Dumbledore cannot look through the phoenix’s eyes; he does not know how he will explain his position here, but he hopes to at least be given the opportunity to try. Given that the phoenix now is watching him intently, however, Percy begins to think that he may not be so lucky.

“Let’s go, Percy,” Tom says, snapping a command at the basilisk. It begins to make its injured way back into its hole, slithering in reverse into the statue. Fawkes snaps his beak at it but seems content to let it retreat. “We don’t need the basilisk anymore anyway.”

Move, Percy tells himself. His feet feel stuck to the floor. The fear curdling in his stomach that he has been able to ignore thus far threatens to overwhelm, and his chest feels very tight. He failed. He’s a failure. All of this—all of the work of the last six years, all of it—has been for nothing.

With a caw, Fawkes dives at Percy, landing with a heavy swell on Percy’s shoulder. The phoenix’s claws dig tightly into Percy’s shoulders, and the pain is enough to shock Percy out of his reverie.

“Tom,” Percy says slowly, as Fawkes huffs in his ear.

Tom turns and sees Fawkes. “Fucking bird,” he says, shooting a spell at Fawkes that the animal neatly avoids. “I’ve always hated you.”

Fawkes leans over and very deliberately lets his beak graze against the diary that Percy is still holding in his sweaty, damp palms. Tom stops, Percy’s wand clattering to the ground, as though he felt it in his own body.

Percy looks down at the diary but is too afraid to act on the realisation that just unfolded itself in his brain.

Tom can feel what is done to the diary.

(But Percy is not ready to kill Tom; that had never been the plan, not yet. He needs Tom still, needs him to tell Percy where the other Horcruxes are. Percy cannot let Fawkes kill Tom, but he cannot let Tom kill Harry. Nobody could die, not until the proper time).

“Get him off your shoulder,” Tom orders Percy hoarsely. Percy obediently shakes himself but Fawkes digs his talons in deeply, drawing blood, and does not obey. “Get him off!”

It happens very quickly. Fawkes trills a mournful sigh that echoes around the entire chamber and then one, two, three tears slide down his feathered cheek and land squarely on the diary’s front cover.

Tom takes a step forward and then disappears, his last shout abruptly truncated. Percy is suddenly alone, holding the diary, still supporting Fawkes’ weight.

The silence after Harry had been Petrified had contained a sudden, shocked quality. This silence seems oppressive, as Percy realises he is the only one in the room still awake.

“Is he—is he dead?” Percy says into the silence.

Fawkes, of course, does not answer—at least in words. He stares searchingly at Percy and opens his mouth. What emerges is something that Percy will later never be able to remember with clarity, a song of resolve and strength and healing that rolls in gusts around the Chamber. It makes Percy think of knights on horses, their wands held high, of the gleam of a unicorn’s coat on the full moon, of a woman in his arms, pressing her lips against his neck, of the bustle of the Burrow, back when it felt comforting and not stifling.

And then it is over, and Percy finds to his surprise that he is crying silently, the tears dripping languidly down his cheeks. Fawkes seems to stare at him knowingly, and then nips at his ear before taking off.

Something like clarity passes into Percy’s soul. Something like peace, perhaps.

Percy stands there alone and does not move to wipe the tears from his face. Although he cannot say exactly what, many things suddenly become clear to him. He does not need to be a hero—in fact, he may never be a hero, and he really ought to stop holding out hope that he may become one. This story already has a hero, and two sidekicks, and a love interest, and a

villain. Percy can be none of those, but it does not matter. This is not his life, but this is his fight, and he must be a serpent in the shadows, waiting to strike.

(He thinks of the song when he casts his Patronus, two weeks later, working up the courage to test the conviction of his soul in Myrtle's bathroom, trying not to look at the wreckage on the floor, trying not to miss his best friend. He is somehow unsurprised that in this life his sparrow has aged into a raven with a sharp beak and an impressive wingspan, weighty and silent instead of fluttering and anxious).

In the present, Percy takes a second to inhale sharply. He must do what he does best: take stock of the situation and adapt. Harry is alive. Ron is alive. Ginny is alive. Hermione is alive. Percy is alive. Tom may be dead. Fawkes is here, but Dumbledore is not, unless he is hiding in the shadows to observe what Percy does next.

Percy casts a revealing charm. Dumbledore is not there, unless he can cloak himself more thoroughly than Percy thought possible, which, now that he thinks about it, is not outside the realm of possibility.

But if Dumbledore was there, then he would have already seen Tom conspire with Percy. He would see his precious Boy Who Lived immobilised. No, what is likely is that this is the sequel to his little test from the year prior. Dumbledore would have seen the message on the wall, which presumably is what Harry, Ron, and Hermione had followed; he would know it was Tom. He sent Fawkes to give Harry a fighting chance, but the important part for Dumbledore is that Harry would be the one to defeat Tom.

So. How can he conform to that narrative?

First, he flips the diary open and scrambles for his quill. *Tom?*

There's a weak burst of ink, but no actual words. Tom is probably not dead, then; only cowed, perhaps forever, perhaps only momentarily. Probability—and Percy's prior knowledge of Tom—suggests the latter.

I'm going to get us out of here, and then we'll regroup, he writes and then shuts the diary firmly. His bag is somewhere—there, next to where he had first awoken. He wraps the diary in the sweater he keeps for Potions classes and stuffs it in the bottom of his bag.

Next, Harry. Percy shoves his emotions aside and examines Myrtle. He strives for the clarity that he remembers from his Animagus meditations, dispassionately observing the facts of the case. Now that he is thinking about it, hadn't this happened to Nick the first time around? He vaguely remembers Nick being found next to some first or second year, and Nick had been fine later on. Regardless, what is done is done. Either Myrtle can be saved or she cannot be. Regardless of his personal feelings for her, she is a footnote to Harry's story.

Percy flicks a diagnostic charm at Ron, and then Hermione, and then Ginny. All alive, all stunned.

Fawkes caws from up ahead, and he shakes his head at the bird. "I'm thinking," he says, looking at Harry's frozen body.

In the original timeline...Harry had presumably retrieved the Sword from the Hat, just as Longbottom had done in the Battle of Hogwarts. He slayed or injured the basilisk, and then probably stabbed the diary, subduing Tom enough so that Dumbledore could take ownership over the diary to do whatever it is that Dumbledore does.

Percy looks at the Sorting Hat, crumpled and off to one side.

Why couldn't that be the truth this time around, sans the diary?

He goes over to the Hat and, feeling foolish, crams it on.

You are playing a dangerous game, child*,** the Hat says instantly. ***I suggest you turn yourself into Dumbledore.

I probably will, but this is important, Percy responds grumpily. *I need the Sword.*

Only a true Gryffindor can retrieve the Sword, boy.

Am I not a true Gryffindor?

The Hat's laughter echoes through Percy's head. ***Try and we'll see***.

Percy takes the Hat off and, feeling rather foolish, reaches inside the Hat. *I need the Sword of Gryffindor,* he commands it.

For a second, nothing happens.

Then, just as Percy is beginning to be offended that he does not count as a true Gryffindor, an invisible weight seems to drop into the Hat so that he nearly drops it. Inside the Hat, his fingers close around a jewel-encrusted sword.

He withdraws it, gleaming and brilliant. It is the most beautiful thing that Percy has ever seen: somehow delicate and solid, the rubies glittering on the handle unquestionably real.

This will not be the last time I hold you, Percy promises the Sword, wishing nothing more but to take it and add it to the treasures in his vault. The rubies look like they have been cut from the Philosopher's Stone.

But he must focus on the plan.

He hurries over to Harry and positions the Sword in his hands. After a second, he picks it back up and drags it through the puddle of blood on the floor from where Fawkes blinded one eye, allowing the drops of basilisk blood to smear the gleaming metal. Then he carefully wedges the Sword into Harry's hands, hoping it will look like Harry beat the basilisk back but was not entirely successful at killing it.

Now, should he be part of the scene? Worried brother, rushing in after Ron?

No. That would be too suspicious. He has to figure out a way to leave the Chamber and then leave the rest to the professors.

For a second, Percy feels his mind mentally blank, the unnatural calm he forced upon himself fleeing in the face of this last challenge.

And then he gives himself a stern shake. He has to think *logically*. He's been there before, that's what Tom had said, so there must be a way to leave.

He's been there before. Something about that niggles at his brain, but he cannot quite figure out why that is important.

He's been there before…

Staring at Myrtle's frozen figure, it suddenly hits him. The Map! It should be in his bag, and the magic he placed on it to allow it to fill in its missing gaps on its own should still be active. He rifles through his bag desperately, avoiding the diary, and unrolls the Map with shaking hands.

The Chamber is on the Map now. He sees their blinking dots. Tom is there, too, and Percy files away that fact in his mind to worry about at a later time. Dumbledore is up in his office with Professor McGonagall, Snape, and Percy's parents.

He whispers the charm to enhance the Map and it zooms into the Chambers, showing a blistering array of twisted corridors and pipes. He follows one with his finger that, as he had once suspected, leads directly to Myrtle's bathroom.

A plan begins to form.

In his bag, he has the spheres with some of the recorded Parseltongue that Harry had obligingly performed for him. It is mostly basic words—primarily the exercises from the first chapter of the primer—but Percy had also recorded the words 'open' and 'close' with the vague plan to go poking around Myrtle's bathroom when he had the time.

Hopefully the passwords to leave this place were not more complex than that.

He follows the Map to the entrance from which the Trio had emerged. He holds his breath when he taps his wand on the sphere but Harry's hissing voice is enough to open the door. Climbing out, he throws one last look at the crumpled bodies behind him before turning away. Fawkes is still there, his caws echoing around the Chamber. They will be fine.

The Map leads him down several very dirty and creepy corridors. Percy stops when he sees the massive skin of the basilisk stretched out, a dry husk of immense length. His mouth goes dry as he contemplates how lucky they are that none of them were killed by the basilisk.

Thank Merlin for Myrtle.

Percy ignores the pang in his chest at the thought of Myrtle and takes the opportunity to saw through some of the skin with his wand, shoving it into his bag. Basilisk skin is an extremely rare and useful ingredient, after all.

He continues his way through the winding corridors until he is at the base of a large and immense tunnel, so tall that he cannot see the top when he looks up. The sides are smooth

and although they are slightly tilted, he cannot imagine anyone crawling up.

To point, he cannot imagine *Tom* crawling up.

Sure enough, when he looks at the map, a little speech bubble appears with the same, confusing Parseltongue writing as in his primer. Hoping that he will be lucky again with *open*, Percy takes out the orb and taps it again with his wand.

A small door appears on one side. Percy opens it to see a long, narrow staircase spiralling into the darkness.

Though Percy cannot strictly imagine Tom climbing all these stairs either, it is far more plausible than any other idea. So, with his wand brandished in front of him, Percy begins to walk, hopefully away from the horrors of the Chamber.

After what feels like several hours to Percy, he emerges into Myrtle's bathroom, his chest seizing with the exertion of so many stairs. (His walks around the lake were, he supposes, rather insufficient for the physical demands of being a hero. No wonder Harry plays Quidditch). Stepping into the room, he stares in surprise at the giant gaping hole where the sink once was.

Well, he supposes he was right about the pipes, at the very least.

Percy shakes his head and then centres himself, waiting for his breath to settle. He takes out his wand and cleans himself the best he can, wiping the dirt and sweat from his robes. He puts away the map and the orb and makes sure the diary is pressed to the bottom of his bag.

Then he begins to sprint toward the Headmaster's office.

***

He is thoroughly out of breath by the time he arrives at the gargoyle. "Please," he cries out, and it is not hard to fake the tears clotting his throat. "Let me in! Sugar Quills."

The gargoyle is unmoving and Percy tries futilely to knock at him. Dumbledore must be able to hear students from outside, otherwise it would be perfectly useless as a guard statue. "Please, I need to see the Headmaster! It is an emergency!"

The gargoyle opens one eye and surveys Percy. Then, with a grumble, the eagle unfolds its wings lazily and Percy eagerly steps into the winding staircase.

"Percy?" Several voices ask simultaneously.

"Mum?" Percy tries to look surprised to see his parents in the office. "What are you doing here?"

His mother sniffs and presses a handkerchief to her mouth. “Oh, Percy.” She clutches at his arm painfully and he tries to suppress a wince. Snape raises a skeptical eyebrow at Percy but says nothing. Percy will have to avoid Snape’s interrogation later on, but that is a problem for another time. *One thing at a time.*

“Mr. Weasley,” Dumbledore says, peering at him. “My dear boy. How may I help you?”

Right. Percy tries to look panicked and hurried, which is not difficult. “I saw the writing,” he says, gasping for breath. “I noticed Ginny was missing.”

His mother sniffles and tightens her grip on Percy, inadvertently paining his shoulder, still bleeding slightly from Fawkes’ talons. Blast, he’d forgotten to heal those wounds. Hopefully nobody will notice.

“Do you know where she might be?” Professor McGonagall says urgently, stepping forward.

Percy nods desperately. “I thought—the Chamber, I knew the last time it opened had been when Myrtle was at Hogwarts. She never said anything, she said she didn’t know anything about it, but I thought she might be lying.”

Dumbledore, for the briefest second, narrows his eyes. Percy takes it as confirmation that he had told the ghosts not to say anything about the Chamber opening and continues to tell his story, locking his eyes on McGonagall’s instead.

“So when I saw the message I thought I *had* to go to Myrtle, I had to convince her to tell me what she knew,” Percy continues. “I snuck out of the Common Room.”

“That was terribly dangerous,” Professor McGonagall scolds.

He swallows, thinking again of Ginny laying on the floor. At another time, in another place, he needs to come to terms with the fact that Ron was a far better brother to Ginny than he ever was. Now is not the time, however. “There’s a giant hole, Professor. In the bathroom, where the sinks are. I thought maybe that was where Ginny was taken. I came straight here.”

“You were helping Severus, were you not?” Dumbledore interjects, even as his mother withdraws her wand, clearly ready to charge down the giant hole in a ghost’s bathroom. “You suspected a basilisk.”

Percy nods, hoping he is not betraying himself. He had already prepared an answer for this. “Yes. I told him what Myrtle had told me: a pair of great yellow eyes.”

Snape clears his throat and steps forward. “I told you his suspicions immediately, Headmaster.”

“Yes, I was not implying that you did not,” Dumbledore says, holding out a hand to stall him. “I am merely regretting that I did not take the time to question you myself, Mr. Weasley. I should have remembered who it was that I suspected killed young Myrtle.”

This is so blatant a lie that Percy cannot help his eyes from jumping to Snape. Snape gives him a look that Percy has no trouble interpreting: *stay quiet*.

Dumbledore does not miss the way that Percy looked to Snape. Percy can tell by the furrow in his brow as the older man looks him over. For a second, he feels the faintest pressure in his mind, and he focuses on the memory of talking to Snape, of planning for roosters and ghost patrols.

The pressure disappears. Dumbledore does not betray whatever conclusion he reached but merely stands from behind the desk. “Let us go,” he says.

Percy follows. His mother looks at him like she wants him to stay but he sticks close to Snape and she does not say anything.

“We will be discussing this,” Snape informs him in low, silky tones.

Percy does not respond. Better to deal with Snape’s interrogation than Dumbledore’s.

They eventually reach Myrtle’s bathroom after several torturous minutes walking silently through the castle. Not for the first time, Percy wonders why the professors don’t always use house elves to get around.

Stepping into the bathroom, Percy has a brief moment of fear where he wonders if the hole will be closed, if something will be different. But when Snape steps aside, he sees that the bathroom looks exactly the same. His parents gasp at the sight and clutch each other; Percy steps awkwardly away from them, in case they are entertaining any thoughts of clutching him.

Dumbledore casts several nonverbal spells at the wreckage but does not reveal what the results are. “It is not cursed,” he says. “Merely a very old pipe.”

“Headmaster, maybe some of us should go first, while others remain,” Snape says. Percy narrows his eyes at him, wondering why he would suggest that. Percy has no intention of being left out of this.

Dumbledore bats the concern aside. “It should be no harm at all,” he says cheerfully, as if this were an everyday occurrence. “Time is of the essence, after all.”

“My baby girl is down there, Albus,” his mother says fiercely. “Let’s go.”

One after the other they all go, letting Dumbledore cast some spell on them to slow their descent. Percy is last, and he and Dumbledore are, briefly, alone in the bathroom.

“Tell me, Mr. Weasley,” Dumbledore says conversationally. “Have you ever heard the name Tom Riddle?”

Percy flinches. He cannot lie so boldly, but he can at least deflect. “We think he is the one who killed Myrtle,” he says. “He was a student fifty years ago. He tried to pin it on Hagrid, but it could not have been Hagrid.”

“Quite,” Dumbledore says. “Severus tells me you suspect Voldemort has returned, after the events of last year.”

Percy flinches again, both at the shock of hearing the Dark Lord's name spoken so plainly and at the boldness of the statement. "Yes," he says, his voice hoarse. "Yes. I think he has stolen the Philosopher's Stone and is bringing himself back to life."

Dumbledore nods to himself. "I wish to speak to you, once we have returned," he says. "I have a proposition for you."

With that chilling statement, he steps back and motions for Percy to go ahead. Percy blinks around the lump suddenly solidifying in his stomach and steps nervously into the hole. As promised, his descent is slow and controlled, and he arrives at the bottom after roughly thirty seconds.

The others are congregated around the door that Percy left open, peering up the stairs that Percy had left open.

"An odd way to travel," Professor McGonagall is saying. "It must be the castle's magic at work."

"One wonders who decided on concealing the entrance to Slytherin's chambers in a toilet," Snape agrees. He looks rather put out at the thought.

Dumbledore arrives then, floating to the bottom. He too gives the stairs a quick glance but then moves on briskly. "Onward, dear friends, and keep your wands at the ready."

They traverse the same path that Percy had taken but in reverse. It is much the same, though Percy does note that Snape too takes a section of the basilisk skin for himself, luckily not seeming to notice where Percy had sawed off a square with his wand. Dumbledore does not explain how he knows where to go, but he navigates the maze with confidence. The only surprise is that they find Gilderoy Lockhart in one of the twists, looking rather cheerfully helpless.

"Gilderoy?" Professor McGonagall asks in disbelief.

Lockhart grins at her. "Do I know you?"

Snape rolls his eyes. "Oblivated, I presume," he says, "And quite poorly done."

Dumbledore nods and stuns him, allowing him to crumple ungracefully to the ground. "We shall have to return to Gilderoy, but be wary: whoever Obliviated him may be still afoot."

Percy eyes Lockhart as they step past him and continue on. This was Ron's doing, if he is remembering the original timeline correctly. There had been something about Ron putting Lockhart in the hospital. Percy had always felt that, though Lockhart was a fraud, he did not deserve to be irrevocably brain damaged.

The door to the Chamber is still open as well. Fawkes is sitting on the ground, as if guarding it.

"Ah, I'd wondered where you'd gotten to," Dumbledore says, holding out an arm. Fawkes flutters to the perch and croons in Dumbledore's ear. Percy holds his wand tightly, ready to

explain himself if Dumbledore suddenly turns on him.

All Dumbledore does is send a spell into the Chamber. “Four living humans,” he reports back, “And, if I am not mistaken, one ghost.”

They trail into the Chamber and see the tableau that Percy left for them to find. Now that it seems like Percy may be getting away with it all, he can recognise that he has actually done well. It seems clear what has happened, without looking too staged.

His mother immediately breaks away from the group and drops to her knees besides Ginny and Ron. Arthur is not far behind. They renerverate the three, who immediately begin to sit up, groaning.

“Harry!” Ron shouts before coming to himself. He blinks blearily up at his father, who crushes him in a hug. “Dad?”

Ginny takes one look at their mother before beginning to cry. Ron and Hermione are not far behind. Percy watches them. Had he ever been that young, that helpless?

By mutual consensus, the rest of the group leaves the Weasley parents to care for the three students. Percy supposes he should perhaps also be checking on Ginny, but he is concerned too with Harry and Myrtle—not to mention concerned with whether the story he set up will seem plausible. He follows Snape instead.

Dumbledore takes in the scene with a practised eye. “Petrified,” he pronounces, before examining Myrtle’s still body. “She must have taken the full brunt of the basilisk.”

“Will she be alright?” Percy asks anxiously.

Dumbledore smiles benevolently at him. “You should know; I believe you have studied ghosts more than any other student at Hogwarts for the last several decades. She will be fine, though it will take a tricky bit of magic to heal her. We will have to wait until all of the students have left to call upon Hogwarts.”

Percy sags in relief, though he knows that she may tell the Headmaster everything when he revives her. Still, she didn’t deserve to die—again—at the hands of Tom Riddle.

“Harry will also be fine, though I hope he will be able to tell us what happened here,” Dumbledore muses, looking at the sword. Harry will, of course, have no memory of fighting the basilisk; can Percy Obliviate him?

“He must have fought the basilisk,” Professor McGonagall says, kneeling next to Harry to lay her hand on his forehead gently. “Oh, Harry. So like your parents.”

Percy and Snape accidentally catch each other’s eyes at that exact moment. Percy has to hide an entirely inappropriate grin at the black look that steals into Snape’s expression at Professor McGonagall’s comment.

“Didn’t finish it off, though,” Snape sneers, looking around. “Somehow still got himself Petrified, too. And who stunned the others?”

“It was Tom Riddle,” Hermione pipes up, unable to keep quiet even in such a fraught situation. “He said he was Voldemort.” Ginny begins to cry even more loudly and Hermione colours. “Er, He Who Must Not Be Named.”

“It is perfectly acceptable to say his name, dear girl,” Dumbledore says absently. “Fear of the name only increases fear of the thing itself. Tom, you say?”

“It was the diary,” Ginny whispers through her sobs. She meets Percy’s gaze and he widens his eyes at her, not sure what her meaningful look means but able to recognise it nevertheless. “I’m sorry, Professor Dumbledore. I think the diary was controlling me!”

Was the diary controlling her? Percy frowns, trying to put together a coherent narrative from his fragmented memories. The diary had controlled her, perhaps, but not since Percy had taken it—right?

"The diary?" Several of the adults asked simultaneously.

"It wrote back," Ginny sobs. "I—I think it was alive somehow."

"Oh, Ginny," says their father sorrowfully, putting his arm around Ginny. "How many times have I told you not to trust something if you don’t know where it keeps its brain?”

Ginny hides her face in her father’s chest. Percy continues to watch her; something about this doesn’t add up.

How *did* Tom get Ginny into the Chamber, anyway? She had been Stunned, but it didn’t seem as though she was possessed. Presumably when Fawkes had done whether he did to curtail Tom, if Ginny *had* been possessed by him, she would have awoken.

There is something here that Percy does not remember. Something that he needs to find out.

Dumbledore shakes his head sorrowfully and peers at Ginny over his half-moon glasses. He is undoubtedly thinking down a similar line. “Many stronger than you have been conscripted against their will by Tom Riddle,” he says. Percy is not sure whether that is meant to be kind or a warning. “When was the last time you remember writing in this diary?”

Ginny keeps her face hidden as she mumbles, “A few weeks ago, I think.”

That is definitely a lie.

Ginny is lying for him—but why?

“And where is this diary now?”

All three children turn and look at where the diary ought to be. Percy looks as well but there is nothing on the floor to indicate that a Horcrux once lay in that particular puddle. He hitches his bag and holds it more tightly, feeling suddenly that he ought to have stashed it before going to see the Headmaster.

Dumbledore surveys the spot carefully, as does Snape and McGonagall. He looks carefully at the statue and the smear of blood dripping down from Salazar's lips.

"The basilisk must have taken it," Dumbledore murmured to himself. "Tom must have given him instructions in case of his injury." He turns to face the rest of the group. "When were you Stunned?"

Ron clears his throat nervously. "Tom and Harry were squaring off, confronting each other. Hissing at each other, I think."

Dumbledore nods slowly and turns and gives Snape a significant look. Percy watches it carefully. What does Dumbledore know? What does Snape?

"We cast a spell at him—or at least, Hermione did." Ron gives Hermione what must be the fondest look Percy has ever seen him bestow on the girl. "My wand, er, it isn't reliable." Ron looks up at McGonagall guiltily, his ears burned red. "Er, did you happen to see Gilderoy Lockhart?"

Snape and McGonagall have matching looks of dark glee.

"We shall return to poor Gilderoy later," Dumbledore says authoritatively. "Continue, Mr. Weasley."

"That's all I remember," Ron says with a faint shrug. Hermione nods from beside him.

"I see." Dumbledore turns to McGonagall and Snape. Percy wonders at his parents being so quiet, at his mother in particular waiting for Dumbledore to conclude his investigation before demanding her children be taken to hospital. This silent, scared deference is unlike them.

They are looking at Dumbledore not as if he is the headmaster at their children's school but as if he is their general, Percy realises, watching the way his mother tracks Dumbledore's every movement, how his father still has his wand securely in his hand as he holds Ginny.

Dumbledore is speaking in low tones, but Percy can still clearly hear what he is saying. Perhaps he means only to shield his words from Hermione, Ron, and Ginny? "Harry must have defended me in order to summon Fawkes," Dumbledore says pensively.

"I do not like that this diary is not here," Snape says darkly. "That means He is not fully defeated."

"The basilisk is still alive," McGonagall agrees.

Dumbledore looks again at the statue of Salazar Slytherin. "Without a host, Tom is temporarily without power," he says. "We shall have to search this place thoroughly and try to find the diary, but I think the students are safe from the basilisk for now."

Snape steps forward. "What is this diary, Albus?"

Dumbledore looks up and sees Percy watching. He smiles gently and adjusts his glasses, looking for all the world like they are discussing a disobedient student or an interesting

article. “A mystery,” he says serenely, and Percy *knows* it must be a lie. “Powerful magic, but magic that bears further study. We must look into it if we are to have any hope of staying a step ahead from Tom.”

Percy longs to say something but he refrains, not wanting to draw further attention to himself. He stays silent as Dumbledore herds them out, floating Myrtle and Harry ahead of the group. He says nothing as Lockhart’s still body joins the eerie procession. Once back in Myrtle’s bathroom he turns to follow his parents to the Hospital Wing when Dumbledore stops him with a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“A word, Mr. Weasley.”

“Why *is* Percy here, anyway?” Ron erupts, a bit rudely.

Dumbledore turns and smiles a quelling smile at Ron. “Your brother figured out where you might be,” he says. “You owe your quick rescue to his powers of deduction.”

“We deduced it all first,” Ron grumbles, but it is mostly under his breath.

Percy gives him an unimpressed look. There’s gratitude, though the question of how the Trio figured it out does merit further thought.

Dumbledore waits until Percy’s parents have walked off with three children and three floating bodies in tow before turning to him. Snape and McGonagall also stay. Percy does not miss that McGonagall angles herself protectively toward him.

What Dumbledore has to say is rather unexpected, however.

“Your suspicions are correct, Mr. Weasley,” he says, levelling him with an intense stare. Percy reinforces his mental shields but Dumbledore does not appear to try and invade his mind. “Voldemort is trying to return. He may very well be successful.”

Percy swallows roughly but merely nods.

“I would like you to keep an eye on your youngest siblings,” Dumbledore continues. “If I may be blunt, I believe young Harry Potter will continue being a central part of this drama for many acts to come. I think we can all see that Ronald is willing to follow Harry into whatever danger he may face.”

Percy nods around a frisson of resentment. Even now, Dumbledore only wants Percy to help spy on his twelve year old brother; even now the implication is that Ron, or even Ginny, will be a more central part of the events to follow than Percy. Dumbledore spares no thought for Percy’s brilliance, his precociousness, his loyalty, his foresight. He merely wishes to employ Percy’s services as a spy due to his proximity to the Boy Who Lived.

“We must stay ahead of this threat,” Dumbledore concludes. He places his hand on Percy’s shoulder, likely believing Percy will be *warmed* and *flattered* by his interest in him. Percy tries to keep any expression off his face, not trusting himself to attempt to convey said warmth. “We need sharp minds like yours to ensure we can do so.”

“Yes, Headmaster,” says Percy obediently. “I will do my best.”

McGonagall and Snape do not say anything, although their expressions—both displeased—promise future discussion. For now, however, Percy only gives them both a short nod before turning and walking out alone.

He chooses the long way to the hospital wing, suddenly feeling very tired. He realises suddenly that he does not know what day it is, or even the day of the week. He cannot remember that morning, nor the morning before it, except in sharp, blurred bursts.

His feet take him to the dripping message, emblazoned on the same wall it was in the prior timeline. The words are the same: *their skeletons will lie in the Chamber forever*, and the handwriting is shaky and uneven.

Percy stares at it for a very long time. His brain is too tired to think, but he floats over the events of the day, mentally marking the oddities and excitements for later perusal.

Something about this is different, this time around. Something about this has not yet been resolved.

***

He stays in bed for the entirety of the next day. The House had stayed up very late last night, hearing the abbreviated version of the story from Ron, Hermione and Ginny. It is actually much the same as it was last time: Harry defeated a powerful wizard impersonating as the Heir of Slytherin, who had unleashed a basilisk on the school. They do not mention the diary or the Chamber, saying instead that it all happened on the grounds near the Great Lake.

Percy wonders absently who told them this story, who agreed on the details, why nobody—not even him in the original timeline—questioned who the Heir of Slytherin truly was, or who had been impersonating him. They all seemed to assume, as he had, that the *Heir* was an adult wizard, someone living in the Chamber, perhaps, and controlling the monster at will.

He does not feel up to facing his housemates, or Fred and George, or Ron, or Ginny. Instead, he lays in bed and allows himself a single day not to think about Tom or worry about the future. Instead he delves into his mind and takes stock of his mental library of records, many of the shelves in disarray.

The familiar act of sorting his memories calms him, and he begins to try and connect the smattering of dots left by Tom’s possession of him. He remembers sitting in class, with Tom keeping up a constant stream of sarcastic commentary; Tom hearing the name *Weasley,* of his own resentful response; Ginny, confronting him, her face pale and withdrawn; Tom and him practising magic; Tom realising that Percy is a Weasley, and Percy talking quickly to explain that he *hates* being a Weasley, that he is a blood traitor to his own family, that he would rather be anyone else than who he is.

What worries him is that, akin to the Imperius, he was acting largely on autopilot. Percy focuses on the memory of Tom discovering his true identity.

They have never respected me, he remembers himself thinking. *I want to be the greatest of them all.*

It is true; it *must* be true, for Tom to believe him. He does not remember crafting that particular strategy—though he had planned for the possibility that Tom would learn his identity—and even with the extra clarity lent to him through Occlumency, he cannot remember consciously choosing to lie.

He does resent them. He does wish to be the greatest of them all, despite Ron, despite Ginny, despite Fred.

Percy spends a very long time avoiding the realisation that follows, but he eventually squares his courage and looks at it in the face.

In another timeline, in another life, he may very well have followed the Dark Lord willingly. If Tom had paid this much attention to him the first time, if he had been the original recipient of the diary...he may have ensured Harry's death.

***

Snape accosts him the very next day.

Percy is walking toward the Great Hall for breakfast when Snape appears in front of him, as if by magic. He yanks on Percy's arm and skillfully redirects his path so that they are inside a classroom before Percy can fully process what just happened.

"Poor reflexes," says Snape as he releases Percy's arm. "I could have just killed you."

"You still might," Percy snaps back, rubbing where Snape had gripped him. "What is that about?"

"I wish to speak to you." Snape crosses his arms and gives Percy a penetrating look. "You've known about the ghost of Myrtle and about Tom Riddle for more than you let on."

Percy tries to straighten his spine. "I knew Tom Riddle killed Myrtle, or at least I suspected," he confirms. "I spoke to Hagrid about it years ago. You can ask him if you don't believe me. I did not know he was the Dark Lord."

"You suspected."

Percy casts about what to say. "Yes," he says, when he cannot think of a lie. "I have been researching him all year, trying to put it together." He risks a blatant falsehood. "I thought it

was the shade, though, brought back to life with the Philosopher's Stone. I did not know there was a diary."

Snape purses his lips as he considers this. "Why did you not come to the Headmaster with your suspicions?"

They have spoken before about Percy's mistrust of the Headmaster. He does not want to risk bringing it up now. "I spoke to you," he says instead. "I did not know if I was correct about Tom Riddle. If I had known Ginny was communicating with him, I would have said something much sooner."

Snape taps one finger against his arm. "I examined your sister," he says, deceptively calm. Percy feels the hairs on his neck rise. "For one allegedly possessed for a majority of the term, her brain seems quite well. There are few missing gaps of memory; her health is fairly normal. There were memories, of course, of her writing in the diary." He withdraws his wand and points it directly at Percy. "Memories of you saying the same."

Percy gapes at Snape, his eyes wide and fearful. "Of—of me?" He manages.

"Yes," Snape says, his wand steady. "Right before her disappearance. This is what I think happened, Weasley. You found the diary; perhaps she threw it away. You began to write to it and you realised very quickly what you were holding. Yes, you would recognise the name Tom Riddle at once. Like you said, you had your suspicions for years."

"Why wouldn't I turn it in immediately?" Percy protests, his heart hammering. He is stuck in the mire of indecision that every liar knows too well once confronted: commit to the lie, or give in?

Snape smiles mirthlessly. "You always wanted to be special," he hisses mockingly. "Percy Weasley, overlooked by all. You thought maybe *you* would be able to defeat Tom. You wanted to be a hero."

"I wouldn't do that," he says, not acknowledging the fact that it is exactly what he is doing. But it's not that simple. He has to keep it secret, has to try to avoid ruffling the timeline as much as possible. He *doesn't* think he's a hero, not really, though he does wish sometimes that he were.

"Perhaps instead you began to be swayed by Tom," Snape continues. "You are already studying Dark Magic; you already crave power; you already are being tutored thrice a week by the Head of Slytherin House. Tom is not the Dark Lord you know of from your parents' bedtime stories; he is just a teenager, just sixteen, *just like you*."

Percy thinks wildly of giving in. But how can he explain? They will want to examine his memories, hear the entire year, and they *will* find out his secret once he lets down his Occlumency shields. He has to lie—but with the truth.

"I didn't," he says and raises his chin to meet Snape's gaze solidly. He waits for the familiar flickering pressure of a mind in his own and then fills his head with memories of his sixth year—the first one. Of his fear of the Heir, of his feelings of guilt and shame that he did not

protect Ginny, of his growing unease with Harry Potter. “Ginny opened the Chamber of Secrets, not me.”

And she had—last time. This time, it is considerably more murky. Percy thinks that under Veritaserum he can credibly say that he did not open the Chamber—after all, it was Tom, technically—but he does not want to risk it.

Snape withdraws from his mind and looks at Percy levelly, not even pretending to consider apologising for the intrusion. “I think you may have been Possessed,” he says bluntly. “Your mind shows signs of it.”

Percy does the only thing he can do. He lets the fear and anxiety he is feeling play on his face, widening his eyes and blinking rapidly. “Possessed?”

“Open your bag,” Snape commands, and Percy obeys, thanking Merlin he left the diary in his second trunk, heavily warded and concealed under one of the rituals he had completed last year. “House elves are searching your room right now. You may have the diary in your possession and do not remember.”

Snape searches his bag and comes up empty-handed. The house elf that he summons a second later confirms the same: no diary.

“I don’t have it,” Percy insists.

“You may have had it,” Snape says, turning away from Percy as he begins to neatly put everything back in his bag. “That is what I would do, if I were Tom.”

“Possess multiple students?”

Snape nods pensively. “Some magic allows him, a version of him, to exert influence on the world around him,” he muses. “He likely feeds off the magic of his host. Your sister desired to rid herself of the diary but cannot remember doing so; Tom would have needed more than a first year student. Perhaps he exerted influence on you, or on another classmate, or even a professor.”

Percy nods hastily, relieved. “It makes sense,” he contributes. “Then he can have magic from multiple people and avoid relying on a single student.”

Snape nods to himself. “We need to find the diary. You truly have no memory of it?”

Percy holds Snape’s gaze, though this time the other man does not delve into his thoughts. “I do not,” he lies the best he can. “I can help you find it, though.”

“Perhaps,” Snape allows. “You will first assist me in preparing the Petrification Draught. Perhaps one of the students saw who attacked him.”

He’ll have to do something about that, too. Obliviates, most likely. “Yes, I can help,” Percy agrees hastily. “I will ask around as well, see if any other students may have missing memories.”

Maybe he should Obliviate a large number of students randomly, jinxing them to forget a weekend in October or the month of December. The cost to each student would be low, and it would help obfuscate the trail in case the Headmaster or Snape examine each student.

“Sir,” Percy risks before Snape ushers him out. “What *is* the diary?”

“Something Darker than you will ever encounter, I expect,” Snape says grimly. “I do not know, but I intend to find out.”

***

McGonagall has the patience to wait until their next scheduled session, but the steely look with which she greets Percy informs him they will not be going through his proposal today.

“I know that you know more about the business with Tom Riddle and Myrtle than you would have me believe,” she says directly, an eerie mirror image of what Snape had said to him just a few days prior.

Percy is more ready for this. He re-explains about Myrtle, and how he was trying to find a link between Tom Riddle and He Who Must Not Be Named, but that he did not have conclusive proof.

“I went to school with Riddle, you know,” she says once he is finished. She smiles wryly at his astonishment. “I doubt he ever knew me, but I certainly knew him. We all did. Riddle was clearly marked for something special; we all thought he would be asked by Albus, who was the Transfiguration professor at the time, or Slughorn—the Potions professor—or even the Headmaster to be an apprentice, which would have been a great honour.”

Why had Percy not considered when McGonagall had gone to school? Perhaps because he does not know her age? Of *course* she went to school with Riddle. Who else might have: Sprout, perhaps?

“Not many knew what became of him after he graduated, though when I began to work at Hogwarts, the Headmaster trusted me enough to reveal that Riddle was the same man causing terror,” McGonagall continues. “At first, I couldn’t believe it, but I had never believed Hagrid was the one who killed Myrtle.”

That was another aspect he hadn’t considered: McGonagall is, by all appearances, fond of Hagrid, or at least content with him as a colleague of sorts. She never would have stood for his position if she genuinely believed him to be a murderer.

“It is strange to have a classmate like Riddle,” she muses. “Much like having a student of Harry Potter, I expect. I knew he would do great things, but never would have foreseen what he actually did.”

“I had no idea,” says Percy when it becomes apparent she is waiting for him to say something.

McGonagall nods crisply. “And I hope you do not make the mistake of thinking you know everything again,” she says pointedly. “We could have discussed your fears, and I could have confirmed them. You are bright, Mr. Weasley. One might even say brilliant. But you are not the holder of all the world’s knowledge.”

He bows his head, feeling chastened. “I’m sorry, Professor.”

She sighs and reaches across the desk to lay her hand on his. “I know you do not always trust the Headmaster,” she says to his surprise. “In truth, I do not entirely blame you, not after the debacle of last year. Albus has a difficult job, balancing the power he has as Supreme Warlock with being Headmaster of the school. You all might not know the history of Grindelwald, but Albus defeated the last Dark Lord our society had. It was a terrible time, worse, I believe, than Tom’s reign. That weighs heavily on him, you know. He feels responsible for Tom.”

Dumbledore *is* responsible for Tom, as much as any one man can be responsible for Tom. Percy has spoken with Tom several times about Dumbledore and knows there is nobody that Tom resents more than Albus Dumbledore.

“I suppose I did think you might talk to him if I came to you,” Percy admits. “I should trust him. I just feel more comfortable with you.”

“And you may continue to do so,” she says, tightening her hand on his. “I care for you, Mr. Weasley. I have thoroughly enjoyed having you as a student and I hope we continue to keep in touch after your graduation next year. As your Head of House and as your professor, I am prepared to offer you confidentiality if you come to me, provided that keeping your secrets will not put another student at harm. I hope you can trust me in the future.”

Percy’s throat feels tight. He nods mutely, not wanting to release any of the tears that threaten to well up inside him.

She withdraws, reaching instead for her cup of tea. “I hope you and your family also will accept my apology,” his professor says. “I let Ginevra down. I knew she was having trouble but I did not intervene as directly as I ought to have. She clearly did not feel comfortable speaking to me or any of the Gryffindor prefects.”

“She wouldn’t have spoken to you,” Percy says, looking up. He cannot bear the thought of McGonagall feeling that same heavy guilt. “I confronted her about the diary several times. I did not know what it was, of course, but I saw how much she wrote in it. Tom probably would not have let her tell you even if she wanted to do so.”

“I thank you for that, but I should have been more proactive,” McGonagall says firmly. “We may have a war ahead, Mr. Weasley. With whatever was possessing Quirrell potentially on the loose, with the Philosopher’s Stone stolen, and with the diary at large, another conflict seems a forgone conclusion. Just as Slytherin House may be disproportionately recruited

from for the Dark Lord's side, so will Gryffindor House be disproportionately targeted. I will need to be more vigilant."

She pauses and then continues.

"To that point, Mr. Weasley, I know Albus asked you to keep track of young Ronald and Harry, but I would like you to come to me with any other suspicions you may have. I will not involve the Headmaster unless I need to do so. Your insights this year were well-reasoned and entirely correct, and together we may have prevented this situation."

Percy cannot help but smile to himself. "Yes, Professor," he says, and this time it feels genuine.

***

Percy dreams.

He dreams of the basilisk's great horned head, its yellow eyes. They hold him in their possessive glare and his throat bulges with a scream trapped inside. He becomes suddenly aware that his robes are soaked through, an unpleasant smell of blood and urine wafting from his drenched hem.

Somewhere behind him, Tom Riddle laughs, cold and sensual and commanding. At the same moment, Percy becomes aware that he is holding a sword encrusted with rubies.

Strike, Tom encourages him, his breath warm on Percy's cheek. It is a startling contrast to the damp chill of the second floor corridor.

I can't, Percy says. The basilisk is not frightened: it knows he will not strike.

Tom makes a small noise of disappointment. ***I won't always be here for you, you know***.

Together, they bring the sword down.

***

He does not open the diary. He does not dare touch it at all, not with Snape watching him so carefully.

He aids Snape with brewing the Petrification Draught and accompanies him to the Hospital Wing to administer it. The nonverbal *Obliviate* he practices serves him well: Dumbledore and

Snape examine all of the witnesses and conclude that Tom must have erased all of their memories.

(He picks five people to Obliviate every day, accosting random people in the stairwells, casting the spell silently as they walk across the grounds. He takes minutes from each one, random minutes, minutes of studying or of meals or Hogsmeade trips. Just in case).

Harry seems to cautiously accept what everyone tells him: he beat back the basilisk and saved everyone's life. Perhaps when one is a boy hero, one accepts these types of stories as one's due.

For Harry, however, he casts a paper-thin Confundus meant only to confuse, not erase. The Headmaster delves into his mind but seems to conclude that Harry merely cannot remember anything after the fight with Myrtle.

Harry refuses to tell anybody what he and Tom hissed to each other. Perhaps he tells his friends, but neither Ron nor Hermione seem particularly friendly toward Percy. He tries to not show his resentment. It is not as though they know that he saved all of their lives.

He sees Lucius Malfoy more than once. The first time, Percy ducks out the way as Lucius stalks toward the Headmaster's office, his house elf bobbing at his heels. Percy is curious but not *so* curious, though he does notice that Lucius leaves behind the elf for his subsequent visits.

Term ends. Abruptly. (He has a ghost-memory, Tom's mocking voice in his ear, ***come on, Percy, you know better than that***, but this he chooses to ignore). He is not being possessed; the diary has not been opened. It is just his brain processing the last term of half-memories and confused thoughts.

Professor McGonagall holds Percy back on the last day of class. She presses a small, bound volume into his hands. His stomach turns but it is no diary; at least, not yet.

"I know you have your heart set on the Ministry," she says. "But your mind need not be wasted on the bickering and shoving of men and women who cannot leave their childhood at the gates of Hogwarts."

He knows what this is, then. Traditionally, a request for apprenticeship is made with one leather lined notebook, filled with an original idea or proposal; one trunk of clothing, to indicate one's willingness to renounce other possessions; and one gold Galleon, to be repaid at the conclusion of the apprenticeship, to symbolise the wealth of knowledge to be gained.

With startled eyes, he meets the eyes of his aged professor.

"Professor Snape may try and give you one too, but I do not lose any of my lions to his dungeon," she sniffs, choosing to ignore the look on his face.

He manages a wry smile. "And would you say you left your childhood at the gates of Hogwarts?"

"I've barely left Hogwarts, so I have not had to make the choice," she responds primly.

If he were to accept her office of apprenticeship, he could stay at Hogwarts. He could watch over his siblings and, more importantly, be close to Harry.

But if he joins the Ministry, he can have an in when the Dark Lord takes over.

(Will Snape offer him a notebook too? He cannot imagine Snape wanting to take him on as his apprentice, but perhaps—)

"You must still produce a proposal worthy of my time, of course."

He wants to accept this so badly it burns. Percy has always loved Transfiguration and these last few years of private tutelage have exposed him to some of the wildest forms of magic.

He opens the book, so like Tom's. He wonders who gave Tom an offer of apprenticeship, or whether Tom bought his own book, scorned, desiring to be his own master.

"I will do my best," he answers, and his stomach gives another turn.

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On the train ride back, Percy is so engrossed in thinking about a possible research proposal that he does not notice immediately when Ginny slips into his compartment. It's empty; it seems whatever friends he'd managed to make over the last few years could not withstand a year of Percy disappearing into a diary.

When he notices her, he has to blink several times in quick succession before he is able to centre himself. "Ginny. Is everything well?"

"Are you still speaking to Him?" Ginny asks in a rush. It doesn't escape Percy's notice that her wand is clutched tightly in her small hands.

Blurrily, the impression of a memory returns to Percy: Ginny, a dark room, a feeling of fear.

"No," he says honestly, thinking of the diary left in his trunk. He *will* be speaking to him again, but he plans for a summer away from Tom's velvet tones.

All of the air goes out of Ginny and she relaxes into the cushions. Her wand dangles from her fingers. He resists the urge to lecture her on the proper grip. "Thank Merlin."

They watch the blurred landscape as the train winds them closer to the Burrow. "Why did you lie?"

Ginny shrugs. “I thought it better they thought it was me and not you,” she says, her cheeks flushing. She adds with humour beyond her age, “I *am* an eleven year old girl, you know.”

“Nearly twelve now,” replies Percy, though he knows what she is getting at. It is surprisingly thoughtful: Percy, nearly to his majority, could have conceivably been sent to Azkaban had someone tried to convict him of attempted murder. “Thank you, Ginny. What did Tom say to you?"

Ginny pales and looks at her hands. She shrugs weakly but does not respond. Percy allows the silence to drag on and finally she mumbles to her fingers, "Nothing much, really. He was charming, you know? And I…" Her voice drops to a whisper. "I was so lonely, Percy."

Is anyone actually happy at Hogwarts? Percy thinks of Charlie, of Ginny, of Hermione, even of Myrtle. So many of them are unable to connect to their peers. Whose fault is it, really, that they feel so alone?

"He is charming," Percy agrees. Even now, Tom’s smooth chuckle slides through Percy's ears. "Incredibly smart and clever."

Ginny nods rapidly, still looking at her hands. Ginny is so *small*. Her hands are so *small*. How could he have let her go through this—through any of it? "Talking to him makes you feel like you're smart and clever too."

"Why did you stop talking to him?"

Ginny raises her eyes to meet his, and Percy wants to press himself back into the rhythmic motion of the train to steady himself against the raw expression of pain twisting her mouth, so unsettling on her eleven year old face. "He was bad," she whispers. "Percy, he made *me* control the basilisk."

Percy sighs. The basilisk is an open question. He thinks about Harry. Is it a mercy to deprive him of the opportunity to go head to head with the Dark Lord again and win, to slay a basilisk with Gryffindor's sword? Percy cannot imagine what it would feel like to be twelve and know he is capable of great feats. Taking that self-knowledge from Harry feels unfair. At least Harry will *believe* that he went head-to-head with Tom and won.

"Headmaster Dumbledore knows about the basilisk now. Next year it will be perfectly safe. And Ginny—Tom possessed you, do you understand that? You are not at fault in the slightest."

"I wrote in the diary. Nobody forced me."

"By the time you realised the diary wasn't safe, it was too late," Percy says forcefully. "There was nothing you could have done."

Ginny grimances. He knows it will take her a long time to process this, just as it will take him a long time to come to terms with the fact that the Dark Lord has been in his head, repeatedly, and with great freedom. "Why did you take the diary?"

He takes another deep breath and then does something very uncharacteristic of him: he reaches forward and holds Ginny's small hands in his own. "I will always protect you," he promises, keeping his eyes on hers. Her hands are sweaty, her nails bitten to the core, and his

larger palms cover hers completely. "I can admit, I perhaps should have taken the diary to Dumbledore; I let my curiosity get ahead of myself. But never doubt that I will care for you, Ginny. You can *always* come to me for help, no matter how scary it may be. Even if it was entirely your fault, I promise to help."

Her eyes are bright with tears. His are not far behind. He never was able to tell her these things the first time, but he will not let her down again.

Ginny sniffles and throws herself at him, and he buries his head in her soft hair. "Anyway," he says, clearing his throat awkwardly. "This time you rather saved me. Taking the blame—that's a real Gryffindor move."

Ginny chuckles wetly and lifts her head. "It wasn't even a lie, not really.″

She gives him a squeeze and then clambers off his lap, flushing slightly. Percy is not normally one for public displays of affection, even with this baby sister. Still, though—he already knows he will treasure the memory of that hug. It may be the last one he gets.

REVELATIONS (1/4)

Chapter Notes

My sincerest apologies for the long delay!!! I changed my laptop password the night before I left on vacation and then somehow managed to FORGET MY PASSWORD. I even had a password hint. It has been a truly humiliating experience with the lovely people at Apple to get back into my computer.

Anyway. This is a long chapter, so I'm going to try + split it up into fourths. Thank you x10000 to everyone who has reviewed! I have really enjoyed reading them, particularly to sustain me over the last two weeks without my laptop. I love hearing everyone's takes on some of the scenes. I'm also emotionally attached to Percy so it makes me super happy that you all enjoy him. Please continue giving me your thoughts, I've been heavily revising these chapters before I post them and so your reviews are influencing me to add or edit some scenes which has been super fun for me!

CHAPTER SEVEN: REVELATIONS (1/4)

1993 — 1994 (Percy is 17 & 30, Harry is 13, Ginny is 12, Tom is still 16, and Sirius Black and Severus Snape are 33)

June 1993

Aunt Muriel presents Percy with the vault key to the Prewett vault ceremoniously on the day of the summer solstice. He takes it from her with both hands outstretched, and the sun-warmed gold feels like fire in his palms. He welcomes the burn.

“There’ll be hell to pay,” she says, nodding at it.

He knows there will be. Oh, he most certainly knows. He has not yet told his parents of Aunt Muriel’s plan to announce him as heir to the Prewett family. Percy and his aunt had decided to wait to submit the final paperwork until his seventeenth birthday—just under a month away—but he knows his mother is hardly going to forgive him for his perceived slight merely because he is legally an adult.

“Thank you,” Percy says instead. They stand in companionable silence, looking out at the expanse of crashing water and wide-brimmed cliffs. The sunrise is chilly for June, and the hem of his robes is damp from the brilliant green grass.

“What next, boy?” His aunt says abruptly, breaking the silence. “This year you wished for clarity and resolve. What’re you planning, then?”

What next indeed? This will be Percy's last year of Hogwarts—if he does not accept McGonagall's offer of apprenticeship—and his second to last year before the Dark Lord returns in earnest. After this year, he will no longer be able to use Hogwarts as an excuse for failing to put his plans into action; he is an adult, now, or days from it, and he must act like it.

"Many things, of course," he responds, and offers her his arm. She leans heavily on him as they make their way through the grounds to the Prewett establishment. Aunt Muriel is also getting no younger. He tries not to let it worry him. She had lived through the war, cantankerous but unharmed, and he tries to convince himself that his interference in her life would not change that. "Charting my next move, primarily."

"Don't take the apprenticeship," she advises him. "Start building your career and do it now. You're already behind, boy; don't let it drag on any longer."

His aunt, at least, will support his ascension in the Ministry. Percy must decide whether to break ties with his family or try to maintain them. He dreads the fights he will have to have, the arguments, the tears. They are so predictable, so boring, so *unnecessary*, particularly in light of the bigger picture.

Percy holds the door open for her and she hobbles inside, sweeping off her large feathered hat and barking for the house elf. "Whatever brings me the most power," he says. The problem is, he does not know what kind of power he needs.

***

July 1993

Percy does do one thing he is not particularly proud of, that summer. He goes ostensibly to visit his father at the Ministry, but he's able to slip away and find one Manfred Silverton, the man in charge of running the annual Ministry jackpot. Silverton has been doing it for years, so he wasn't particularly difficult to find. Nor was he difficult to Imperius. Likely anyone who would be skilled enough in the Dark Arts to Imperius Silverton to win the Ministry lottery has no real need of the money. (Percy has often wondered why Dark wizards tend to be so much wealthier than Light wizards and concluded that a general lack of scruples does tend to pay handsomely).

Percy would have left it to chance, but his study of Arithmancy theory would suggest the odds of Arthur Weasley winning the Ministry lottery twice, even in a repeat of the same timeline, is highly unlikely. A whispered spell, a bit of meddling, and all seven Weasley children are briefly united in what is a furiously warm Egyptian summer. This Imperius hardly even turned his stomach, even with the ghost of Tom's laugh in his head.

They visit Cairo, Luxor, Aswan. One day, they take a languorous ferry down the Nile. It is a *Muggle* ferry—cheaper than the Wizarding counterpart, which at least has air cooling charms—and Arthur nearly goes overboard with the excitement of watching Muggle tourists sip

lemonade on the deck. The Muggle lemonade, without a carefully applied sweetening charm, has grains of sugar in each sip that are unfamiliar on Percy's tongue.

Percy does not enjoy the heat pressing in on him on all sides, but he enjoys the trip nonetheless. Wizarding history stretches back before recorded Muggle history, but the sight of the pyramids rising grandly into the air, the carvings preserved in the tombs, the clear-eyed expression on painted faces staring ahead—the innate sense of *age* fills him with a breathless sort of awe. Wizarding Egypt is even older, and he shivers to think of it, generations and generations of wizards, of dynasties, of power struggles and magical achievement, thousands of years before Percy was even conceived.

Bill is in his element, of course. Their mother shrieks at the sight of his long hair, but he wears it proudly, skin tanned and freckled. Percy eyes his dragonhide gloves and mentally compares them to the ones he scavaged out of the Room of Requirement. Unfortunately, Bill's are better. They meet his coworkers: other jocular young adults, primarily European. They navigate the steep staircases of the tombs with ease, pointing out where the edges of the ancient wards spark with magic, even today. Theirs is an easy camaraderie and Bill is undeniably their leader.

(Percy cannot help but snidely ask why there is a dearth of Egyptian wizards in the program, given that he doubts there is a shortage of Egyptians interested in studying their own magical history; their resulting argument is one of the few times Bill loses his cool enough to snap at Percy in front of the entire family).

True to form, Fred and George try to trap Percy in one of the smaller pyramids. He lunges after their bodies disappearing down the thin tunnel, but Charlie moves to intercept him.

"Not worth it," Charlie mutters quietly. "Then you'll give Bill another chance to play mother."

Percy snorts. Bill has enjoyed falling into his role as eldest Weasley, doling out attention and chastisements in equal measure, secure in the knowledge that they'll all be leaving in a few days, leaving Bill to his freedom.

"I do hope to visit you in Romania," he replies. "If Tonks ever speaks to me again, I thought I'd ask her about the Christmas holidays."

Charlie gives him a sideways look. "You and Tonks, huh?"

Percy rolls his eyes. "Not you too," he groans. "Between Aunt Muriel and Andromeda, I've had enough busybodies commenting on my friendship with Tonks."

His brother laughs easily and drops the topic. "She says you didn't write at all last year. Did something happen? Did you get into a fight?"

Of sorts, Tom's voice whispers in Percy's ear. He bats it away with practice. Tom cannot possibly be possessing him still, not when his diary is in an entirely different continent. Still, his brain is able to conjure up Tom's silky tone at a moment's notice.

“Just was a bit overwhelmed,” Percy says vaguely. They begin to make their own, more sedate way out of the tomb. Both Percy and Charlie have to crouch, their red hair scraping the top of the tunnel. Percy shivers, a bit; he does not like the damp confinement of these tombs. He does not know how Bill stands it, the sharp contrast between the musky, muggy air of all these narrow corridors and the shock of the prickling heat outside.

“Tonks says you’re to be the new Prewett heir.”

Percy cannot tell what is lurking behind the evenness of Charlie’s reply. Anger, perhaps, or envy? He replies cautiously, “Aunt Muriel’s rather taken a liking to me.”

Charlie swears as his head grazes the uneven ceiling. “Dunno how Bill gets around in these,” he mutters to himself. “I think it’s a good thing. Sad to let that part of our history die, don’t you think? And it ought to be you. You’re the only one who ever bothered to visit Auntie Muriel. She scares me, to be honest.”

They emerge into the blinding sunshine. The younger brood are gathered around Bill, who is holding up some sort of statue fragment dramatically. “Don’t tell Mum yet, will you?”

“Trust me, I plan to be in Romania when that conversation happens.”

Percy spots a photographer plying another tourist family with offers and makes a beeline for him, reaching in his pocket for some of the silver coins he’d exchanged at the International Floo centre. Charlie looks after him quizzically—Percy has admittedly never been one for photographs, or sentimentality—but he obediently gets into line when the photographer pockets the silver and turns to set up his camera.

After all, they cannot forget the real reason they have come to Egypt.

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A news article that Percy leaves out for Scabbers to read: *MINISTRY OF MAGIC EMPLOYEE SCOOPS GRAND PRIZE!*

A corresponding article, similarly left on the table: *SIRIUS BLACK ESCAPES FROM AZKABAN!*

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August 1993

Percy would never admit it, but waking on his seventeenth birthday brings a lick of delight. He supposes in some ways it’s actually his thirtieth birthday, but turning seventeen makes

him feel closer to his past self, his true self.

(Although—can he still claim his past self as his true self? He cannot say. He tries not to think of the timeline he left behind, whether his mother is mourning two sons, or whether the entire timeline disappeared in a flash. There is only the present, and only the future, and he cannot be distracted by the past).

Though his wand has intermittently worked for him, at least in the Burrow where his magic is masked by the other adult wizards, Percy gives it a flick out of tradition, levitating one of the books on his bedside table. He's finally an adult (again). He waits, sitting on the edge of his too-small bed, his feet brushing the rug underneath, but he does not feel the anxiety and eagerness and awe that he'd felt the first time, nor the panic he'd anticipated for this timeline. Sometimes Percy forgets that he'd travelled through time; sometimes he looks at his face in the mirror and forgets what his jaw had looked like before, after it had lost the rest of its babyish fat. Sometimes he ducks under doorways his shorter, younger body has no trouble clearing, and sometimes he trips over his own feet. Sometimes it feels like his older self is just *there*, hovering out of reach, waiting for him to step into it and wear it like a second skin.

After a moment, Percy shakes his head. The mirror in the bathroom he used to share with Charlie congratulates him on his birthday, laughingly advising him to try and tame some of his red curls before the big day. He gives it a thin-lipped smile and waves his wand to mute the animation charm, not wanting any additional commentary as he stares at himself and imagines himself at thirty years old. What would he have been like, had he not sent himself back through time? Would he have married someone by now, or reunited with his family, or even had a child? Would his eyelashes still be so girlishly long, would he still break out in intermittent spots, would he still struggle to tame the persistent curl that drops over his forehead?

You'll just have to wait and see, he tells himself, turning away to step into the shower. He does not think it too likely he'll die in this timeline, unless he does something tremendously stupid. He still has five years until the day where he crosses the line into years not yet lived. Just because he's turned seventeen-and-thirty does not mean he ought to have a crisis now.

At breakfast, his eyes are cool, and his mouth pursed. Next to the plate of eggs and rashers is a small gift, wrapped in red paper. A watch from the Prewett vault, different then the one he'd received the first time. Slightly more ornate. Percy tries not to wonder what that means.

"Thank you, Mother," he says politely. She treats him to a genuine smile, the first, it feels, that he's received from her in weeks, and so he submits silently to her tight hug. Buried in the familiar herbaceous smell of her embrace, Percy considers telling his mother that Aunt Muriel will be submitting the final paperwork today and then abstains. She will find out in due time. No need to spoil the day.

His father claps him on the shoulder. "Good show, son," he says, and there are actual tears in his eyes. Percy smiles uncomfortably; Arthur cried at both Bill and Charlie's majorities, so while tears are to be expected, they are hardly desirable.

There are letters, from Bill, Charlie, Tonks, Andromeda, and, to his surprise, Draco Malfoy. Ron splutters and lunges for the last when Errol drops it in the potatoes but Percy is faster.

Dear Percy,

Congratulations on reaching your majority and your new status as the esteemed heir of the Prewett line. My family would like to welcome you to a celebratory meal at your convenience.

Yours,

Draco Abraxas Malfoy

Percy stares at it in some shock and consequently fails to prevent Fred from leaning to the right and snatching the letter while Percy protects his left from Ron.

"Why are you writing to a Malfoy—" Arthur begins heatedly.

"Esteemed heir of the Prewett line?" George reads out, voice heavy with incredulity. "What are we, chopped liver?"

Oh, bother. Percy looks up to see six pairs of eyes staring at him in shock at that news. In for a Knut, in for a Galleon, he supposes.

"Aunt Muriel has named me as her heir," he says, adjusting his glasses.

His mother sets her mug down with a bang, English Breakfast swelling dangerously close to its lip. "Auntie Muriel did *what*?"

Fred snorts. "No wonder you went over there every summer," he says derisively. "How many summer solstices did it take, eh, Perce?"

"Never thought to invite us along?" Ron chimes in, the flush in his face seeming to drive out the memory of him rudely scorning Percy's offer several years prior.

Percy scoffs. "You lot hate Aunt Muriel, you *never* visit her unless Mother makes you."

Said mother is still staring at Percy with no small measure of anger, or maybe betrayal. "And what is wrong with being heir to *this* family, I may ask?"

"I'm not our heir!" Percy exclaims. "Bill is, if he ever decides to come back from Egypt and accept it."

Arthur clears his throat and shoots a quelling glance at Molly, who takes an angry sip of tea. "We consider all of you heirs to our name," he says placatingly. "All of you, from Bill to Ginny. Being an heir is not about money or succession; it is about upholding your family's honour."

Percy closes his eyes and tries to inhale evenly. When he opens his eyes, the expressions on his family's faces have not changed. "I know," he says. "That's why your insinuations that I *used* Aunt Muriel are so insulting. I care about this family—*all* of this family, our Weasley *and* our Prewett heritage. I seek to uphold our honour and claim our birthright!"

Again slams the mug. Percy wonders if it will survive this conversation, and whether his mother would dip into the budget for a new one. Molly leans forward, her face flushed. “I worry about you,” she says bitingly. “We didn’t raise you to care so much about *birthright* and *blood*.”

Percy scoffs again and gathers up his letters. “I refuse to have this conversation,” he says, getting up from the table, breakfast half-eaten. “How *dare* you all believe the worst of me—merely because I forged a relationship with one of our relatives. You all really believe I *planned* this? I visited Aunt Muriel because I respect her, and I want to hear about our family’s history—yes, Fred, and you can stop rolling your eyes whenever it pleases you. Caring about birthright, about blood *lines*, about honour; it’s not the same as caring about blood purity and you all know it. And with the way this family has treated me, I’m *glad* I have another name to call my own.”

Ignoring the immediate explosion this statement ignites, Percy turns on his heel and walks away.

***

He goes alone to take his Apparation test. The Knight Bus is as jerky as ever, and having to clutch to an icy metal pole does nothing to appease his black mood or the headache pressing on his temples. For all he has tried to do better in this lifetime—spending time with his siblings, not being as headstrong, trying to be *likable* instead of merely a swot—he seems doomed to receive the same treatment from his family in the end. He has always been too different, not like a *normal* Weasleys. Too focused on school, too ambitious, too thoughtful. Not willing to accept Dumbledore’s word as law or follow blindly after Harry Potter. It is as if his family will always be looking for an excuse to disavow him, to force him to follow their mould.

But you are your own person, Percy, Tom’s voice whispers in his head as he strides through the Ministry. ***And soon they will regret discounting you***.

He passes the test easily, pockets the licence without any fanfare. The instructor compliments his clear display of determination, and he accepts the compliment without changing expression. He has determination and even deliberation in spades. He has been dithering on the destination, but for no longer.

A small pop takes him to Gringotts. He opens his own vault, his very own, protected from his family. In goes the pile of gold he’s been steadily adding to all year, in goes the trunk with the Philosopher’s Stone, in goes some of his more sensitive packages and notes that he has long since memorised.

The goblin escorting him sweeps a much lower bow upon his exit than his entrance. They recognize the power of gold, even if his parents do not; will not.

If anyone were to watch him stride down Diagon Alley, they would see his face changing: hair, darkening to chestnut brown, eyes lightening to grey, his nose deforming slightly. Percy is nothing if not a dedicated student, and his handle of self-transfiguration far exceeds the average Hogwarts graduates'. By the time he steps off of the main path, heading for the entrance to Knockturn Alley, he is virtually unrecognisable.

Borgin, or perhaps Burke, looks up as Percy steps through the door. "Sir," he says cautiously, clearly not sure whether Percy is friend or foe.

Percy withdraws his wand and levels it at the store owner. "I want you to tell me everything you know about Tom Riddle."

***

He returns to the Burrow, hours later. His pop of Apparation is so precise that a nearby rabbit only cocks her head quizzically when he materialises into being. Though it's quite late, the sun continues to cast dusty rays across the gentle green hills of Percy's home.

He sees none of it. Instead, he's thinking of what Borgin told him: the oily assurances, the hints and insinuations, and critically, what Percy picked up from the other man's mind.

(That had not been his first Oblivate, but it had been the first of his own volition, not out of desperation. It felt the same as all the rest; no harder, no easier).

Tom Riddle had worked at the shop right out of Hogwarts. Borgin could not remember who had hired him; it seemed like one day he had just appeared, commanding his way into a job with the same imperiousness that he employed in all aspects of his life.

"We knew he wanted something," Borgin had said, eyes shifting around the shop. It was clear he knew exactly who Tom Riddle became. *"He was hard to say no to, even then."*

And? Percy imagines Tom prompting, alert.

And he must have gotten it, Percy thinks. Borgin had not said it, per se, but he had heavily implied that Tom had strong-armed him and Burke into allowing him, just a teenager, to take on increasingly more important clients.

"Important clients," Borgin had purred, an ugly look of resentment present all these years later. "*They all loved Tom. Burke and I, we wondered what he was doing, all those private visits. Our clients were not always—safe.* "

Percy can imagine Tom's low-throated chuckle, the way he would preen at the insinuation that he delved into the dark underworld and emerged unscathed. *What would you have wanted?* He thinks at the version of Tom his imagination keeps at the ready.

Percy knows what he would have wanted: money, yes, ingredients, books, artefacts. A cup, or a locket, owned by an elderly lady, susceptible to flattery.

All those years ago, Percy had resolutely refused to fall into the trap of seeing Tom in every plot. The issue is, Percy can think of no other explanation than the worrying: Tom had accumulated at least one object from each Founder. Percy can only imagine what magic they lent him, knowledge and sustenance and power and strength.

(He thinks of his image in the Mirror of Erised and replaces himself with Tom. His family fades but the shine of the finery does not).

Percy will *not* be beaten by a teenager, even one like Tom Riddle. The artefacts are real, and if Tom can find them, so can he.

He begins the slow walk to the Burrow from the perimeter of the wards, thinking of his approach, how he will have to hide it from Snape. He's tired of letting people dictate his life, of letting restrictions bind him.

Tom had discarded the diadem back in Hogwarts; perhaps its usefulness was limited, or it required magic from the castle to be useful. If he had gotten his hands on the sword, where would have left it—and why?

Neville retrieved the sword from the Sorting Hat; perhaps he can do the same again. Perhaps, taking the idea one step further, perhaps all of the Objects are bound to each other. Perhaps if he goes to the Chamber, he can call the locket to his side.

And the cup, well, that would prove to be more of a struggle. If he were Tom, where would he put Hufflepuff's cup? The Sorting Hat implied it was not at Hogwarts; where would it be? Lost forever, perhaps?

What can be lost can be found. Percy thinks of the Stone, sitting behind goblin wards.

He wonders if Tom Riddle has a Gringotts vault.

***

The next day, and the day after that, are awkward. His siblings shoot him uncomfortable looks, his mother ignores him with impressive reproach, and his father tries to plead with him to apologise.

Percy does not even entertain the thought. He has nothing to apologise for, not least to his mother, who ought to apologise to them all for cutting them out of the Prewett family to begin with.

***

Harry Potter somehow makes his illicit way to Diagon Alley. Percy is considerably more displeased at this the second time around, having been far too excited about the chance to ditch his family for Penny the first time. Now, sans girlfriend, nothing prevents him from grumpily glowering as they go to fetch the Boy Who Lived.

"Ministry resources being used as a taxi service, then?" Percy comments acidly as he steps inside the town car. "Only the best for the Boy Who Lived."

His father shoots him a disappointed look. Why he can't see that the Ministry would never shell out for town cars for Arthur Weasley in any other circumstance is beyond Percy.

Ron gives him a look that would be similar to Arthur's if it was not so angry. "He's not got anyone else."

"I didn't realise his relatives didn't count."

"Did you forget the *bars on his window?*" Ron hisses through clenched teeth. "His uncle threatened to kill him, I bet, there's no other reason he would run away!"

Percy is already bored of this brewing teenage drama. He turns away and stares sulkily out of the window. Harry is just like the rest of them. He has more power, metaphorically speaking, in his right hand than most of the students at Hogwarts, and he squanders it on Ministry escorts and free stays at the Leaky Cauldron.

Hermione is there too. Nevermind that *he* would never be able to rouse the entire family to meet a friend of his. (Nevermind that he has few friends to meet). Harry Potter must need an entourage.

Well, Percy's planned for this. He reminds Ron to purchase another tonic for Scabbers—he'd found the missing bottle in the hallway, untidily hiding under Ron's socks, and nudged it back into obscurity with his toe—and bids a chilling adieu to the rest of his family.

"Is he mad at me?" Harry whispers to Ron as Percy stalks off.

"Just being a prat as usual," Ron whispers back audibly.

It takes the entire walk to The Single Blade to wipe the sneer off Percy's face. Outside the cafe, he takes a deep breath and composes himself. Inside, the Malfoys are sitting together, awaiting him.

The sight of their matching blond heads taunts him, but he bats the thought away. Today, he is here to act befitting a Light heir.

"Lord Malfoy," he greets Lucius as he approaches the table. He inclines his head. "By the honour of our crossed wands, I thank you for this invitation." He turns to Narcissa next.

"Lady Malfoy, by the honour of our shared ancestors, I thank you for this welcome." Draco, last. "Draco, by the honour of our shared interests, I thank you for this opportunity."

As he'd practised, he keeps his face blank and takes a seat without waiting to be asked.

All three Malfoys have different expressions that nevertheless match, as if part of a curated exhibition. Lucius has the tiniest furrow in his brow, likely wondering what Percy means by *crossed wands*. Perhaps he remembers the diary he gave to Ginny and wonders what came of it. Narcissa looks appraising but softly amused at the daring it would take for a Weasley to claim shared ancestry with a Malfoy. Meanwhile, Draco merely looks taken aback, perhaps contemplating what interests they may have in common.

Lucius is the first to speak, as he ought. "Percy Weasley," he says. "Well met."

Narcissa inclines her head. Her voice is soft, but Percy would not make the mistake of thinking her gentle. "We were surprised to hear of your great-aunt's choice. Some feared the Prewett line would be another to die out."

Percy smiles. It has teeth. "With your cousin's escape from Azkaban, there may be time for him too to name an heir."

Narcissa is too well-mannered to rise to the bait, but Draco looks shocked at Percy's nerve, calling Sirius Black Narcissa's cousin.

"Much blood has spilled between our families," Lucius continues calmly. He does not apologise for it. "I am pleased to see that one of your father's sons may not continue to relive history."

"I hear my youngest brother and Draco are already filling their role as historians," Percy comments dryly. He sees Lucius' lips twitch; Ron's and Draco's enmity is still amusing, at this age. Nobody has yet died.

Narcissa casts her son an indulgent look. "Young boys can be foolish."

"Others think ahead." Lucius looks very intently at Percy, who must resist the urge to try Legilimency. Lucius would undoubtedly feel his intrusion and would not be so susceptible to fall for an Obliviate.

What does Lucius want? Percy cannot for the life of him think of why the Malfoy head would seek him out, Prewett heir notwithstanding. The Prewetts may have no quarrel with the Malfoys, but they are not on the same side ideologically. Perhaps he is merely fishing for information on the diary. Percy is not sure what to tell him, though it has already occurred to him that it would be advantageous to have a mild ally in Lucius. He does not want an advocate; he has no desire in being pressured into taking the Mark. An ally, however, is something else entirely.

Percy says neutrally, "You are on the board at Hogwarts, I hear. Any news on the events of the prior year?"

Lucius' face is unreadable. "The latest gossip is that a basilisk has been released in the school."

"The Chamber of Secrets," Draco scoffs, finally unable to stay silent. "If the Heir really had returned, I would have expected more than a bit of paint on the wall and a few petrifications. Potter allegedly went toe to toe with the basilisk, but I think we can all agree that *that's* bollocks."

"Language," Draco's mother chides him. "I understand your youngest siblings were involved as well, Mr. Weasley."

"Ginny was taken," Percy confirms, eyeing Lucius, who's face remains perfectly smooth. "Ron went along to save her."

"She was lucky that she had a brother so determined," Lucius says cryptically. "Said she anything regarding the Heir?"

Percy takes a sip of his water. "A mystery. Perhaps he—or she—was detained, or has more ambitious plans," he responds smoothly.

Lucius looks at him penetratingly. "Such as?"

Percy shrugs, his heart beginning to beat more quickly. "Only if an heir to the Slytherin line really returned, I imagine he would have more to do than set basilisks on schoolchildren. And if the Heir was acting through an agent, it most likely was a student, and we already discussed the unreliability of teenagers."

Lucius leans back, looking thoughtful. Narcissa is also watching him intently. Lucius could not have known the diary was a Horcrux. Did he have instructions to release it to the school at a given time? Perhaps a plan that the shade of the Dark Lord had set up while possessing Quirrell.

Lucius must be wondering whether Percy has any information on the Dark Lord's rumoured return. Percy has no intention of giving him any of it.

“I heard she was possessed,” Narcissa says. The concern in her voice is perfect: motherly but reserved, the look she sends her husband slightly apprehensive, as if she were disobeying him to inquire after the health of a Weasley. “That must have been quite an ordeal. She is recovering well, I trust?”

Percy blinks, though in retrospect he should not be surprised that Ginny’s alleged possession had been spread, at least among the governors of Hogwarts. He wonders if Snape had told Malfoy that Percy too had been affected. Lucius’ face gives nothing away, though Percy is abruptly certain that he had wanted Narcissa to ask. “As well as can be expected,” he hedges.

“And she truly has no information on who possessed her?” Lucius asks, as if the answer hardly was of any concern to him.

Percy takes a sip of his tea. “She was Obliviated, I’m afraid. As were my brother and his friends. Seems as if the Heir—whoever that may be—did not want to leave any...loose ends.”

“So he was not taken by surprise,” Draco says, looking up at his father for approval. Lucius narrows his eyes. Draco does not do anything as plebeian as flush in embarrassment, but he does immediately drop his gaze back to his plate, silent.

“Have you any idea who the Heir may be?” Percy asks, figuring he is entitled to some questioning of his own.

“If only I did,” says Lucius sorrowfully. “I would apprehend him at once.”

Despite himself Percy has to fight to hide an instinctive snort of amusement. He notices Lucius noticing his reaction and clears his throat, changing the subject. “Am I to assume you asked me here merely to question me on the events of the last year?”

Narcissa smiles at him, and it is incredibly warm. Percy can see why Lucius would have wanted to marry this woman. To have someone so indisputably lovely by his side would help him tremendously to ward off untoward accusations. How could anyone believe Narcissa Malfoy would marry a man of violence? She looks soft and delicate, as if she would shatter at the slightest disturbance.

Percy knows the story, though. Percy knows perfectly well that Narcissa Malfoy lied to the Dark Lord’s face in order to save her son, and moreover, that she survived. He is not fooled for a second.

“I knew your parents in school, of course,” Narcissa says. “It really is such a shame our relationship has deteriorated so significantly.”

“I had not realised you were at Hogwarts at the same time as my parents.” Percy frowns slightly, but he cannot count back the years, for Narcissa is already speaking again.

She leans forward and takes his hand in hers. “I remember your uncles fondly. If I may presume, I would assure you that they would have liked you very much and would be pleased to hear you named as heir. I imagine it will be difficult for you to navigate your new position, and it would be remiss of us to not offer any help you may seek.”

Percy inclines his head. In truth, he does need help, and from someone other than Aunt Muriel. “I thank you for the offer; it is incredibly generous.”

"I hear you are friendly with the Tonks family as well," Narcissa says, a shade too quickly. Tension steals into her spine and Lucius' shoulders. Percy straightens automatically, noticing Draco flick a glance at his mother.

"Yes," Percy answers. He wonders again about Narcissa and Andromeda. It could not have been easy for either of them to lose each other. "Madam Tonks and her daughter have been very welcoming. We have spoken much about the history of the Black family."

"You enjoy learning this history?"

"I enjoy learning the Old Ways," Percy responds vaguely.

"And your parents?" Lucius asks.

Percy raises an eyebrow. "Children do, at some point, become adults."

Draco, he notices, hides a smile at this. Conversation turns to Sirius Black and then to Hogwarts, but Percy cannot shake the feeling that Lucius Malfoy is not done with whatever plan he launched with this facade of a congratulatory lunch.

***

September 1993

Finally, they are on the train. Percy sits with his brothers, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny, ignoring their icy looks as he squeezes himself inside the small compartment. When George and Fred rise to sit with their friends, Percy invents a thin excuse for them to stay, which they frown at in unison before reluctantly acquiescing. Percy remembers the Dementors from his last ride to the castle and wants his siblings where he can see them. His Patronus has materialised once in this timeline, and even if it doesn't, he does not want to leave them all unattended.

When the Dementors peer their cloaked heads into the compartment, however, Percy cannot even bring himself to stutter the incantation. His mind is full of Fred crumpling to the ground, of his mother's tears, the dark looks of blame in his brothers' eyes, Ginny's small body at the base of the statue of Slytherin.

"Expecto Patronum!"

Percy jolts as Lupin, out of nowhere, appears just in time to drive away the beasts. Lupin passes out chocolate while Percy looks at his wand in disgust.

Absolutely useless. His heart is still thudding, his mouth dry, the sweat collecting under his armpits, and his fingers are clammy around the wand. He'd not even managed to say the incantation. How could he ever hope to protect his siblings if he could not even drive away a simple Dementor?

He stands and catches Lupin as he leaves their compartment. "Excuse me, sir?"

Lupin looks alert but polite. His robes are worn, his face lined. Percy thinks of Tonks' youthful exuberance and wonders, not for the first time, how these two *married*. "Are you alright?"

"You're the new Defence Against The Dark Arts professor, right?"

"Yes, are you a Prefect?"

It still stings. "No, sir, just logical." He pauses. "My Patronus has taken form in the past, but today it was no more than mist, sir. Would you be able to help me with it?"

Lupin looks at him consideringly. "You're the eldest Weasley, aren't you."

Percy nods and tries to look trustworthy. "I plan on staying close to my siblings this year, sir. I want to be able to protect them."

"Let's see it," Lupin suggests.

Taken off guard, it takes Percy a second to refocus. He thinks of the overwhelming sense of relief and delight and purpose that he felt, newly eleven for the second time, ready to right his wrongs, and incants a strong, *"Expecto Patronum!"*

Mist, weaker than the last time. His raven is nowhere to be seen. He tries to recall the sound of Fawkes' song and cannot do so.

"Your pronunciation and gesture is correct," Lupin says shortly. "Must be an issue with the memory."

He turns to go. Percy lets him, feeling chastised. It can't be the memory, so fine, he'll figure it out on his own.

***

Percy wakes before breakfast and slips to Snape's office as usual.

Snape looks blacker than normal, his face twisted into a scowl as he sorts the pile of schedules with aggressive flicks of his wand.

"Sir," Percy says to announce his presence.

Snape doesn't look up. "To what do I owe this pleasure, Weasley?"

Percy ventures cautiously, "I thought we could discuss our plans for the year, sir."

Snape turns on him and Percy takes an instinctive step back. "I fail to see what plans *we* have," he hisses. "It seems as though you are content to blunder along on your own!"

"Excuse me," Percy starts, but Snape is faster. He sweeps the schedules into a pile and strides to the door. He turns again just before he exits.

"Interrogating *Elias Borgin* about Tom Riddle?" Snape spits out. "Lunching with the Malfoys? Are you out of your feeble mind?"

"I Obliviated Borgin," Percy protests, implicating himself before he remembers his intention to lie. How did Snape know about either of those activities? Was he spying on Percy?

Snape scoffs. "A shoddy Obliviation. Borgin came to me, speaking of a gap in his mind. A noticeable gap. He showed you a record book, correct? *Left open to a series of entries by Tom Riddle*. You did not ensure he put the book away before wiping his mind, so not only did he know somebody erased his memory, he knew exactly what was discussed. Let me be clear, Weasley; I have no interest in working with somebody so *arrogant* and *idiotic* to believe such a course of action even *remotely* reasonable!"

"Fine, I won't be interrogating anyone anytime soon," Percy concedes. "Don't you want to know what I've learned?"

"That Tom Riddle worked in Borgin and Burke's to gain access to Dark artefacts? I could have told you that, boy."

Percy is about to triumphantly inform Snape that he learned of Tom Riddle's likely quest for the Founders' Artefacts, but he abruptly pulls himself short. If he tells Snape, he will want to find those objects himself, and Percy had already decided not to involve Snape in that particular mission.

So he must duck his head and mumble an apology, though it burns the stomach to be thought of as incompetent.

"This is why I need you," he even manages.

Snape surveys him and then turns to open the door. "We shall see if you have anything of value to impart on me this year, but I doubt it."

***

At lunch, Percy slips away to see Myrtle. He presumes by his continued freedom that she has not told anybody about his presence in the Chamber. He knows Myrtle; she would not tell until she had a chance to confront him. He is not safe, not until he can speak to her and convince her that he is not aligned with Tom.

She is waiting for him in the bathroom, her arms crossed.

Percy spells the bathroom to be secure and then faces her. "Glad to see you are well," he says, a bit awkwardly. "You saved Harry Potter's life, you know."

Myrtle continues to scowl at him. Absently, he wonders when was the last time he'd seen her burst into tears. She has since become much more adept at eyerolls and glares than sobs.

"Myrtle, I can explain," he tries again when it is clear she is not going to speak.

Still silence. Percy bites his lip and then conjures a chair, sitting down. "I noticed that my sister was writing in the diary," he begins. "More importantly, I noticed that it was writing back. She refused to give it to me so I stole it from her to see what it was."

"You knew who it was," Myrtle says, her scowl deepening. "You knew exactly who you were writing to and you didn't see fit to tell me. I *asked* you, Percy, more than once, and you ignored me."

"I suspected that the man behind the diary was He Who Must Not Be Named, or some version of him," Percy excuses himself. "I should have told you, but I knew you wouldn't want me to write back to him."

She peers at him closely. "You did a lot more than just write back to him, Percy. You were *working* with him—voluntarily."

"He has...information that I need." Percy takes a risk and holds her gaze intently. "We both know He is coming back, Myrtle. Maybe as Tom, maybe as whatever possessed Quirrell, but either way, the Dark Lord is returning."

"What could Tom possibly tell you?" Myrtle insists, though Percy notices her growing infinitesimally more translucent at the thought of Tom returning.

He risks a half truth. "He didn't die that night, Myrtle. I don't know how, I don't know why, but he's come back already in two ways. We both know he's capable of incredible magic. Tom might be able to tell me what he did."

"Why you?" Myrtle challenges. "You should go straight to Dumbledore."

"I don't trust Dumbledore."

Myrtle frowns at him. "Why?"

"Because every time he's given a choice, he prioritises his own agenda over his students," exclaims Percy. In the back of his head he feels memory-Tom agreeing, remembers their conversations about the manipulative nature of Dumbledore. Tom may agree with him, but that doesn't mean it's not true. "You truly think he did not know Tom was in some way responsible for the Chamber? When we were down there, he led us directly to the statue without hesitation. His phoenix was there, Myrtle. He could have come at any time."

Myrtle considers this, some of the anger melting from her tone as it turns analytical. "Why wouldn't he? Maybe he had a reason for holding back."

Power, whispers Tom in Percy's head.

Percy shakes it off. He has not written in the diary, nor taken it out of his trunk, for several months now. He cannot help but think of what Tom would say, however. When begins to write to Tom again, he will have to be extra careful to ensure that he is not possessed.

"Harry," Percy says instead. "He wants Harry Potter to defeat him."

"He's thirteen," protests Myrtle. “He can’t possibly think a thirteen year old will do anything against...against Tom.” She shivers and swoops down, avoiding the sink that leads into the Chamber.

"Quite." He risks a glance at her and sees by the set of her transparent jaw that she has not yet finished with whatever she has to say.

They sit in silence for a few minutes after that, but far more companionably. Percy risks a glance at. Myrtle and finds her pursuing her lips in thought. He must convince her, both because she is his friend but also because she can ruin him with an errant comment.

"I'll help," she says finally. "I'll help you talk to the diary. To…to Tom."

He bristles instinctively. "Why do you think I need the help?"

Myrtle snaps back, "Oh, I'm sorry, was petrifying students part of your master plan?"

"I have it under control."

"If you don't let me help, I'm going straight to Dumbledore," she has the audacity to threaten. For a second Percy just glowers at her, but then he forces himself to calm down.

"Fine," he says uncharitably.

"You'll come see me everyday so that we know you are not possessed," she says primly.

This actually is not the worst idea, though he burns at the injustice of being monitored by a 16-year-old ghost. "Fine."

Myrtle smiles smugly. "If you die, you can share my bathroom."

The familiar offer startles Percy into a laugh and he feels his earlier irritation dissipating. He has such few friends, he cannot afford to lose any.

Why not? He imagines Tom saying.

Because I am not like you, he responds in his head, if only to remind himself.

"We have another problem," he says, pulling out the Marauder's Map. His copy; the original remains in his dorm. He needs to give it to Harry at some point before he graduates. His mouth dry, he hesitates over the Map before showing her what had been seared into his mind for the past few days: *Tom Marvolo Riddle*, emblazoned in his bedroom, hovering over the diary that he has concealed in his second trunk.

A name, where that had not been one before. Quirrell had shown up with Tom, but Tom had been possessing Quirrell.

"Percy, *explain this*," Myrtle hisses, and her voice sounds more like the adult she never became than the teenager she was doomed to always be.

"It was the diary," he admits, feeling something in his chest constrict as he says the words out loud. "I think it's gotten stronger, Myrtle. It didn't used to be on the Map. Maybe something I did awakened it."

Speaking the words into the air gives rise to all of the worries that Percy had been attempting not to think about, and he shifts nervously on his feet as each worry floods back into his mind. What *had* he done to awaken the diary? Did the diary represent an entire half of Tom's soul, and did each Horcrux subsequently represent half of the remaining soul? Would that mean that the Dark Lord that will return will have but a *sliver* of a whole soul? Was that why he would be mad, and barely human?

How much of a soul is required to be on the Map? Did that imply ghosts retained half of their souls? Could souls even be thought of as something tangible, something that can exist in neat fractions? Did Tom's continued name on the Map imply that he was—still possessing Percy? Once awakened, could Tom ever be dormant?

Myrtle's voice verges on hysterical, which matches the mood Percy is in, and yet ratchets the tension in the air yet another degree higher. "The diary is his soul?"

Percy leans back on his knees, watching the indelible gold lettering as it dances mockingly on the Map, his chest beginning to tighten. "Yes," he says, unable to meet her eyes. "He split his soul somehow, Myrtle."

She shakes her head desperately, sending a cool breeze wafting through the room. "But he is not a ghost."

"Something like it, though; a shade, living some sort of cursed life." Percy forces himself to raise his gaze to her level, to look at her, this diminutive girl, her body transparent. Tom's first victim. It softens his tone when he admits quietly, "He used your death, Myrtle. He used it to power a ritual to split his soul."

Myrtle clutches at her chest, staring at him with wide eyes and repeats, "His soul is in the diary?"

"Yes," Percy confirms, expecting waterworks.

And indeed, for a long second, Myrtle trembles in the air, her translucent form shimmering violently. Behind her glasses her eyes are wide and staring, and the beginnings of ghostly tears shimmer. Percy meets her eyes steadily, preparing for waterworks. Then, her eyes narrow, and her form begins to still. "You knew about this from the beginning," she accuses, and her voice is steady, cold, and dry. "You came in here your first year and asked me about how I died. We've been studying souls for *years*, Percy. You knew. *How did you know?*"

Blast Myrtle, blast her keen observation, her mind that she craftily conceals behind gossip and giggles. Percy worries his lip but in the end, there's nothing to it. Part of him even feels relieved at telling her his secret. After all, if anyone had a right to know what came of her death, it is Myrtle Warren, sixteen year old Ravenclaw, Muggleborn.

"I travelled through time," he says, looking at the tiled floor. "Four years after I graduated, Harry Potter defeated the Dark Lord, but at a great cost. Many died, including my brother, Fred. I found a ritual to send me back."

“You sent yourself back through time,” she says, her voice flat.

“Yes.”

“How did you do that?”

“I found a ritual,” Percy says, thinking back all those years to his frenzied research in the Library of Archives. “And a Time Turner.”

“And you sent yourself back to your eleventh birthday,” she continues, her voice still flat.

He flushes at the implied criticism and hastens to explain. “I needed *time*, Myrtle. Like you say; we’ve been researching souls for years, and we’re no better off than we were at the beginning. What is the diary? Why is it on the Map now and not at the beginning of the year? Do ghosts have souls? We need these answers, Myrtle.”

“Why didn’t you complete that research before you sent yourself back in time?”

Percy opens his mouth to respond, and then just as quickly, he shuts it abashedly. “I know,” he says heavily. Even now, after seven years, the hastiness of his decision weighs on him.

Myrtle hovers in front of him, waving her hand as she dismisses the point. “Well, what’s done is done.” Her eyes are still narrowed, and she does not let up on her questioning. "What do you know about his soul?"

"He split it; he made some number of Horcruxes, I do not know how many."

"Three, seven, or thirteen," she suggests, just as he had thought so many years ago. "The diary is a...a Horcrux?"

"Yes," he confirms. "Horcruxes can be created by splitting one's soul, and then concealing that fragment inside a physical object. It can only be created with the murder of an innocent, as a transformative force, I think. Sixteen year old Tom...well, he used your death, Myrtle."

"I see," says Myrtle, and her voice is as cold as her touch.

"In...in my timeline, my sister was possessed by the diary, so I thought it may be one of the Horcruxes. I knew you died the last time the Chamber was opened, so I thought I would start with you," Percy adds, awkwardly. He swallows and then says, "I'm sorry, Myrtle. Tom used you."

Myrtle sniffs and takes off for the ceiling, spinning in tight circles; her version of pacing. "You're just like the rest of them, Percy Weasley. Go, now that you've got what you came for. See if I care."

"I didn't say that," Percy protests, getting to his feet. "I *like* spending time with you, Myrtle. You're my friend."

"Just a ghost," she sniffs, affronted. "You knew spending time with me would not affect the timeline, but you didn't trust me enough to tell me the truth. You can't have it both ways, Percy. In the end, you're just like everyone else. You don't see me as *somebody* real, just a memory, or a spell, or a bit of inexplicable magic."

Percy opens his mouth to argue but then shuts it thoughtfully. "You're right," he says finally, and as soon as he admits it the burn in his stomach hisses and subsides. She is right, and so it does not cost him as much as he'd thought to say, "You proved yourself early on to be trustworthy, and to be a real friend to me." He hesitates and then forces himself to add, "And you *are* someone, Myrtle. Merlin's beard, we know you've been on the Map all this time. We may not know what exactly you are, but I'd never think you were—nobody."

"Just because there's more of me than whatever sliver of soul is in that diary, then? Is that your metric, whether something shows up on the Map or not?"

"Myrtle, you've got to know you're my best friend," snaps Percy, exasperated, the words slipping from his lips before he can stop them. He flushes slightly as her attention snaps to him but then soldiers on bravely. "Myrtle, I'm *sorry*. When I thought the basilisk got you—" he trails off, shaking his head. How can he explain that behind the surface-level embarrassment that his best friend is the ghost of a sixteen year old girl, that behind his panic that Tom was possessing him, that behind his conviction that Dumbledore was going to crash down his door and arrest him for tampering with Harry's fight with the basilisk, that behind all of the anxiety that kept him up late into the night the entire summer was a persistent fear that he may have been responsible for Myrtle's second death? When he'd first seen her, frozen—

Her cycles come to an abrupt stop and she flips, peering at him closely. "I accept your apology," she says softly, and then zooms down to his level. "Percy, what are we going to do?"

Percy exhales slowly and tries to orient himself on the issue at hand, rather than the anxieties that flutter around his stomach like stormflies. "I need Tom to tell me what the other Horcruxes are. He can't be defeated, truly defeated, until they're all gone."

"Tom doesn't trust anyone," Myrtle points out.

"It's the only clue we've got."

"You're *definitely* checking in with me every night."

"I will," he promises, more strongly than before.

***

There is so much on Percy's mind that he almost forgets to turn his proposal into Professor McGonagall.

He still hasn't decided whether he wants to stay and accept her offer of apprenticeship or enter into the Ministry. The thought paralyses him, and so he responds as he always does: over-prepare in order to leave both doors open, both choices remaining for a later time.

After class, he lingers until his classmates all file out. The NEWT class feels significantly smaller; in his year, Oliver dropped it, as did Mariana. Percy sometimes wonders what seventh years do after dropping NEWT classes; the average student hardly needs more than one free period per day. Oliver, of course, is off, busy trying to eek every ounce of talent from Harry Potter, but he knows Mariana is only half heartedly involved in a club or two. Doesn't she get bored?

“Mr. Weasley, I trust you had a productive summer,” Professor McGonagall greets him. She moves from behind her desk so they are standing next to each other and he realises that the growth spurt he had over the summer finally puts him taller than her. He's the shortest brother, which rankles him whenever he is surrounded by all of them simultaneously.

“Somewhat,” he hedges.

“I hear you accepted a prestigious new position,” she comments, raising an eyebrow.

Percy’s expression sours. His elevation to Prewett heir has reverberated through society with more velocity than he had expected. Several of his yearmates have already asked him about it with varying levels of politeness. To his surprise, several of them came bearing notes from their pureblood parents, congratulating him and offering vague suggestions for establishing future alliances. When he was merely a *Weasley* heir, nobody bothered to consider forging any sort of relationship with him. His father may believe his name brings honour, but the events of the past week have enlightened Percy to how little regard many had for his family.

“In a way,” he responds.

His professor chuckles. “Tread carefully,” she advises. “They are undoubtedly waiting to see how you will turn out.”

What had surprised Percy is that even the heads of Dark families seem to be reaching out to him. The Prewetts, he had learned from Aunt Muriel, were traditionally a Light family, but perhaps due to Gideon and Fabian’s early demise in the last war, they were not so firmly entrenched in that category as the Weasleys. It seems to Percy as though practising and supporting Light magic was far more acceptable than casting in one’s lot with Dumbledore. Magical strength is magical strength, whether directed toward the Light or Dark Arts. As a new heir to an old but quiet family, he is somewhat of an enigma.

“I am also waiting,” he says honestly. Every year brings him closer to the great unknown, that invisible line that separates from life previously lived to life that awaits. He had been twenty

three when he twisted through time, and though in some ways he feels thirty now, in other ways he still feels incredibly young.

She smiles warmly at him and holds out her hand. “I admit I hope you discover that at Hogwarts under my tutelage,” she says pointedly.

Percy fumbles for his research proposal and withdraws the dark journal. He hands it over and she flips to the first page: *An Analysis of Transformative Forces Through the Lens of Soul-Based Magic*, *by Percival Ignatius Weasley.*

“I admit I expected something like this,” Professor McGonagall says, turning the page to scan the abstract. She seems to notice Percy’s blink at her comment and clarifies, “It is obvious that you have been interested in what drives Transfiguration, what causes resonance between our magic and our spells. I admit this is not strictly a Transfiguration-related topic, but I would be delighted to supervise this, Percy. This work has the potential to create quite a stir.”

And oh, he can see it: the thrill of the chase, the delight of discovering something new, the elation of publishing his work and seeing it set alight the established norms of the field, all of those old wizards who wouldn’t otherwise give him a second thought. He knows that McGonagall will champion him, allow him to delve into the deepest recesses of magical theory, ground him as needed but let him run free.

Percy wants this so badly he has to swallow against a lump in his throat.

Meanwhile, Professor McGonagall has continued to muse aloud as she looks at his outline. “To be honest, I think your desire to relate everything back to the concept of a transformative force is limiting,” she says now, her brow crinkled thoughtfully.

“Resonance,” he says, his voice gravelly. He clears it uncomfortably. “You’re right; that’s what I’m really trying to get at.”

“Congruence between spells,” she continues, beginning to sound animated. “Understanding the magical properties of magic itself, not merely considering why wood and iron are different.”

“The logic,” he continues. “Why a spell has to be the way that it is.”

She pauses to look at him again, her eyes bright. “And soul magic?”

Percy worries his lip. “I am not sure exactly how to phrase it,” he excuses himself, thinking of all of the research he has completed over the last six years. “But my theory—my current hypothesis—is that our souls and our magical cores are *linked*, somehow. That one cannot speak of our magic without speaking of our soul.”

“Controversial, but not without promise,” McGonagall says, her lips quirking. She hands back the journal and gives him a penetrating stare. “You are not sure you are going to take this offer, are you, Mr. Weasley.”

Percy allows the silence to grow as he considers it. He looks around the classroom, so familiar to him: rows of desks, the blackboard, the diagrams on the wall. Even the way the light slants softly from the enchanted windows feels familiar. After nearly fourteen years of living at Hogwarts, Percy feels like his castle is truly his home.

Professor McGonagall lays a hand on his shoulder, and her eyes are warm and understanding. “You do not have to decide now,” she says softly, “And my offer will not expire at the conclusion of your last year here. If I may be so presumptuous, Mr. Weasley, I feel you desire greatly to prove yourself, and while I strongly believe research and academia will give you what you so crave, I know you may feel acknowledgement in other tournaments may give you a stronger sense of victory and satisfaction. If you must wage your battles in the political arena, let's say, and return later to scholarship, I will accept the delay—if you promise, of course, to keep your mind as nimble and sharp as it is today.”

To his utmost embarrassment, he feels his eyes beginning to fill with tears. Maybe he should have told McGonagall, not Myrtle. For a while, he had even been considering telling Snape. Snape may be a spy and entrenched in Dark Magic, but Percy knows without a doubt that Snape views him now only as an entertaining distraction, and would think of him merely as a tool to bring down the Dark Lord if he knew the truth. McGonagall may not be able to advise him on how to destroy a Horcrux but she at least would respect his agency, his desire to amend past wrongs.

But he cannot tell her; he cannot put her at risk, and he cannot risk Dumbledore learning the truth. So instead of spilling his burden at her feet, Percy wipes the back of his hand roughly against his face and nods silently. She kindly pretends not to notice his anguish.

“If you are amenable to the suggestion,” Professor McGonagall says briskly, “I believe our tutoring sessions this year would be best suited to fleshing out your proposal. At the very least, at graduation you will have something any university would be pleased to support, and the act of putting it together will give you some insight into what an apprenticeship under me would look like.”

He nods mutely, still not trusting his voice.

“Same hours as last year, Mr. Weasley. My schedule is lighter this year; last year, Miss Granger threatened to be the death of me. I’ve foisted her off a bit on Filius, as I do not believe Transfiguration is her true passion.”

“That was my fault, Professor,” Percy says, a hint of a smile returning to his features. “She did not know it was possible to request private tutelage.”

“I admit I did not offer her the opportunity her first year,” McGonagall admits. “I felt as though she may take the sessions as an excuse to avoid her peers, rather than as an opportunity to grow as a student. Now that she has Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley, I believe she is more steadied.”

Something occurs to Percy and he frowns. “Harry isn’t getting extra lessons, is he?”

McGonagall purses her lips. “Mr. Potter does not appear to be overly scholastic, I’m afraid. I’m surprised; both his parents took tutelage from me, and I admit I even considered asking James to be an apprentice of mine, had I thought there would be any chance of tearing him away from the Auror Academy.”

Percy, like many of his peers, had always assumed that Harry would get private lessons, perhaps even from the Headmaster himself. It surprises him to learn otherwise.

Maybe he should talk to Harry. Merlin knows he’ll need the extra knowledge.

***

Dear Nymphadora,

Please forgive me for what happened last year. Needless to say, I was not myself. I hope to communicate more regularly this year, and of course, you'll be an Auror next year; perhaps I'll see you at the Ministry?

Professor McGonagall has offered me an apprenticeship. I've not told anyone yet. I find myself conflicted about what to pursue.

Yours,

Percy

***

After a few days of classes pass uneventfully, Percy feels confident enough to take out the diary. He has not written in it since the prior term, hoping the lack of exposure will fortify him against possession.

Tom, it’s me. Percy.

Tom’s reply, as always, is instant. ***Where have you been? What happened to me?***

Dumbledore sent his phoenix to the Chamber. He found us all there. I lied, of course; I said you were possessing me.

And the diary?

I was able to hide it near the statue of the Chamber when I realised he was coming. I thought if I had it on my person he would find it.

And you returned yourself to the Chamber?

Percy considers a lie and then, as is often his practice, settles on a half-truth. *I recorded Harry using one of the pensieve spells we learned last year.*

Percy feels the cold breath of a chuckle on the back of his neck. ***Clever.***

Tom… Percy lifts his quill and watches the splotches of ink fade into the diary. *Tom, Dumbledore is watching me this year.*

Tom does not reply.

I know you want to be free. I want it too. But Tom, if you return right now, he will know it was us. I managed to hide the diary but he's watching me. Carefully. I'm trying to improve my Occlumency, but I don't know if I can keep Dumbledore out.

Percy holds his breath as Tom's dark lettering seeps onto the page. ***I grow tired of waiting, Percy.***

It is just one year.

I will burn Dumbledore to the ground, Tom writes, almost lovingly.

And I will help, when it is time, Percy writes back with shaking fingers.

He just needs to buy himself *time*.

***

On Friday, Percy is a few minutes delayed to his tutelage with Snape, as Fred and George thought it would be an appropriate time to test out what Percy recognizes as a precursor to their Ton-Tongue candy. They mix something into his soup that causes his tongue to feel very heavy in his mouth. (They mournfully inform him that they wanted his tongue to grow as well, but they had not yet figured out the formula).

His attempted lecture through his immobilised mouth drives them to tears of laughter instead of recriminations, and so Percy gives it up as a bad job and storms angrily to the nearest bathroom. He's able to undo the magic after some time, but by the time he's able to speak properly, he realises that he is already late.

Indeed, when he finally enters Snape's office, his professor is sitting behind the desk marking papers. He has set up no cauldrons, nor written a recipe on the board.

"Professor?" Percy asks hesitantly.

Snape does not acknowledge his presence. He flips to the next parchment and begins reading it intently, his quill digging in savagely to underline what is undoubtedly a comment designed to bring the recipient to tears.

"Professor, I'm here for my tutelage."

At this, Snape looks up and briefly meets Percy's eyes. "I must have forgotten the meeting in which I agreed to take you on as a student."

Percy walks a few steps closer to the desk. "Sir," he begins, without any idea of how to finish the sentence. He hopes Snape will interrupt him, but the other man resumes marking, seemingly content to let Percy's words wither into the chilly September air.

Snape is upset at him: that much is clear.

"I'm sorry that I went after Tom," Percy says in a rush. "It was a stupid thing to do."

"Yes," Snape agrees. "I do not make it my business to consort with those who make stupid decisions."

"I won't do it again, sir."

Snape once again looks up, perhaps at the pleading tone in Percy's voice. "Your sister was *corrupted* by the darkest wizard of our time—and a sixteen year old boy," he says, lingering on the word *corrupted* in such a way that Percy immediately begins to wonder, in a way he had not previously, why Ginny had woken up in the first timeline with Tom's name on her lips. "Your brother is friends with His worst enemy. You, heir to both Weasley and Prewett lineages, would do well to remember what it would mean for Him to return and know of your name."

"So you're trying to protect me?"

His professor gives him a long and searching look. "No," he says finally. "I told you before, boy. I do not waste my time with mediocrity."

"I am *not* mediocre," protests Percy, surprised at how much Snape's dismissal of him burns.

"An Animagus transformation and some Outstandings does not a great wizard make, Mr. Weasley," Snape replies coolly. "I asked you once where your ambition lay, and you were unable to answer me. I took you on for tutelage because I thought you may prove to be of some interest. I know you have a thirst to prove yourself, but what you lack is follow through and clear vision. I am not your precious Professor McGonagall; I have no desire to *mentor* you, to hold your hand. I can enable you to achieve great things, but I will not drag you kicking and screaming into greatness."

Percy takes another step forward. "I can be great," he says desperately. He stops short of saying that he is already great; he does not lie to himself, and he knows he has not yet achieved his potential.

Snape smiles thinly. “Perhaps, but your time at Hogwarts is nearly finished, Mr. Weasley. If you return as Professor McGonagall intends, you shall be devoted to her art, not to mine.”

“Give me one more chance,” Percy says. “Please.”

“You know not why you even beg me for that chance,” Snape says cruelly and accurately, and Percy feels the tips of his ears flush red. “Achieve something of value, Mr. Weasley. Find your clarity and then you may return to my office. Until then I do not wish to waste my time on you.”

Percy turns tail and flees, his bookbag thumping against his legs. It is only when he finds a quiet corridor and slows down that he allows the dark rage that Snape’s unkind words cause to brew and bubble inside of him. Snape is no different to his parents, to his peers, to everyone that looks at him and finds him wanting. Percy does not even *need* Potions.

(What does he need, then—a mentor, a saviour, a teacher, a leader? An audience to his feats, a rival to beat? Percy himself does not know but he cannot deny that Snape’s closed office doors cause a pang in the deep recesses of his stomach).

He writes about it, later, with Tom.

The Potions professor no longer wishes to have me for extra lessons. He said I was merely mediocre, that I would never be great.

I know more Potions than your professor could dream of learning, Tom replies silkily. ***I will teach you in his stead.***

Do you think I am great?

No. The word pulses and disappears on the page. ***But you could be.***

Of course the only person to see his potential is a sixteen year old Dark wizard.

Tom continues to write: ***You are highly analytical and capable. Your rigid adherence to the rules prevents you from embracing the flexibility necessary to overcome routine excellence, but you can learn otherwise. You are intelligent. You are not mediocre, Percy.***

He knows, dimly, that Tom is likely trying to tell him what he wants to hear; but at the same time, Tom *sees* him, understands his strengths and limitations. Percy does not shy away from taking advice from Tom Riddle. He may be cruel and unforgiving, but he is brilliant and insightful. Percy would be a fool to ignore his words.

***

The esteemed Percival, heir to the Prewett family:

You're a prat, but I forgive you. My mum says your mum came and shouted at her a bit. Apparently she isn't pleased about your Aunt Muriel's actions. I don't think our mums get along too well, to be honest. I doubt my mum shouted back, but I have a suspicion she did that icy glare, which is honestly so much worse.

Anyway, just wanted to give you a heads up. I can see where she's coming from; if my kid went and got Narcissa Malfoy or someone to declare her the heir of the Black family, I would be pretty chuffed too. But I suppose the difference is that the Prewett family never killed anyone or disowned your mum, so.

Onto merrier topics. Last year at Hogwarts! Memorised the school song yet? I expect a full rendition.

Cheerio,

Tonks

***

October 1993

Percy watches Crookshanks chase Scabbers around the Gryffindor Common Room and has to conceal a fit of laughter behind several loud coughs.

He will never understand Peter Pettigrew. Why hide as a rat for *twelve years*? Why not run away sooner? Why put up with the ridicule of being somebody's *pet*?

Still chuckling slightly, he opens the diary. He will need to play Tom smoothly this term. He thinks his strategy will be to mention the idea of immortality and see if Tom takes the bait. Tom, Percy has learned, cannot resist being the person that knows more than the other person. He thinks he can convince Tom to give up the secret.

Good evening, Tom.

Percy.

Happy first month-end of term. Do you ever miss being a student?

Tom's writing is always so perfectly formed, so smooth. ***Oddly sentimental for you. Shall I be concerned?***

It is my last year. I know you'll tease me terribly for it, Tom, but I will rather miss Hogwarts. It feels more like home than my home ever did.

Tom's reply takes a second to materialise. ***Yes. I can understand that.***

You've never told me anything about your family, Tom.

I have nothing of value to say about them.

Because of their inherent lack of value? Percy risks a joke.

He feels Tom's smile in the looped l's in his reply. ***Naturally.***

I have my guesses, Percy writes. Logic dictates that Tom's next Horcrux will be created with the murder of his father, so he wants to push Tom into talking about his family if possible. *Decadently rich pureblood heir—I'm talking Abraxas Malfoy. Your mother gave you a tub of everlasting pomade for your seventeenth birthday.*

Again, Tom's laugh seems to stir the small hairs on his neck. ***Something like that.***

Percy drops it for the time being; he'll have to circle around from multiple angles, lest Tom get suspicious of him.

I'm still struggling with the Patronus.

I've told you, Percy, it's the <u>memory</u>, Tom replies, underlining the last word three times. ***Ignore all the tripe about happiness. All it takes is power. When did you feel the most powerful?***

When he woke up in the Burrow, eleven years old. But Percy used that memory to no effect. He cannot think of that many times he's felt truly powerful in the last few years—perhaps mastering nonverbal magic, or twisting into his animagus form—and that always depresses him slightly.

Never, he writes back churlishly. *I'm not powerful, Tom. I'm not like you.*

Then become like me, Tom replies instantly. ***Create your own power.***

What do you even want me to do?

What makes you weak?

A flurry of ideas flit quickly through his mind—indecision, anxiety, age—but he writes down simply, *Not being able to assert myself.*

So assert yourself.

I don't know how.

Have you been practising calling upon your own magic?

Percy blinks at the apparent non-sequitur, taking a second to gaze around the room. Fred and George are entertaining Ginny and a few of her friends with some type of joke box that is smoking ominously but not yet causing a catastrophe, though Percy notices Henry's attention on them from across the room. Oliver, Alexander, Henry, and Katie are attempting to muddle

their way through an advanced variant of the Cheering Charm, or so Percy guesses, judging from the wide smiles on their faces and the way that Theodora, nearby, is brandishing the Charms' textbook. He breathes out, softly, and then extends his magical awareness, allowing it to skim over his peers, to hover over their skin and spark as it collides with their unconscious power.

Yes.

Not by sensing others, Tom writes, as if aware of what Percy had just been doing. ***Calling upon your own magic for your own purposes.***

With a small frown, Percy reels in his magic, allowing it to gather around his body, to switch his gaze until he can see the small sparks gathering in his palms. This is a necessary prerequisite to most of the Dark rituals, though he's not been practising those as heavily, particularly now that Snape does not seem keen to forgive him any wrongs.

His magic is pulsing, he realises after a second, pulsing with his heartbeat, ebbing and flowing over his body like water in a quick-moving stream. Some magical theory insists that magic is carried in the blood through the veins, and hearing his pulse beat in time with his magic is certainly a compelling proof for the hypothesis.

I believe so.

It must become instinctual, if you are to be a great wizard, Tom writes sternly. ***You must feel your magic like that at every second of the day, ready to be called upon and utilised. If you cannot practise that, you will never be able to master Dark Magic, no matter how hard you try.***

Is it tiring?

Rather the opposite. Tom pauses and then adds, the elegant lettering appearing beneath the fading words, ***I rarely miss being a student, but I do miss Hogwarts.***

Yes, I think I will feel the same, Percy admits back. He sets down his quill and looks again around the room. Henry catches his eye and gives him a grin and a wave, and when Tom does not reply to Percy, Percy closes the diary and gathers his things to join his classmates. Extra revision is always helpful for the NEWTs, after all.

***

Percy risks lingering after class to speak to Snape, who eyes him coolly but does not castigate him immediately.

"Sir," says Percy, as evenly as he can. "What do you consider to be the difference between Dark and Light magic?"

Snape's eyebrow inches toward the top of his face. "Gambling with your precious little soul, Weasley?"

Percy restrains himself with some difficulty. "I have been practising cultivating an awareness of my magic," he says instead. "Why is it that Dark magic seems to require this awareness, but Light magic does not?"

Snape sets down his quill, a sign to Percy that he has become engaged enough in the question that he will deign to answer it. Percy hides a triumphant smile. "As usual, Weasley, you've got your understanding of magic entirely backward," Snape drawls. "Dark Magic does not require an awareness of your magic, insofar as it requires an understanding of your *strength.* Dark spells are spells of compulsion. A successful Dark Wizard imposes his will on another. Many a Dark Wizard can be magically strong but not *aware*."

Percy frowns but does not interrupt. He is not sure Tom would agree with this summary.

"Light magic, on the other hand, is magic rooted in self-awareness and understanding, though not strength," Snape continues. "It is why so many Light wizards are traditionally skilled at magics like the Animagus transformation, or Legilimency. To successfully penetrate one's Occlumency shields, one does not *force* one's way through. To rely on magical strength would merely result in one, or both, wizards' minds destroyed. Similarly, as your precious Professor McGonagall may have told you, it matters not how strong a wizard is if he cannot accurately understand his own form."

Parsing back what Tom has told him, Percy has to slowly admit that Tom never said anything about *awareness* of magic, only the ability to call upon it and keep it ready.

Snape pins him under a steely glare. "Why do you ask?"

"Without the guidance of your lessons, sir, I must rely on my own studies of magic," says Percy, a tad bitingly, but polite enough that he hopes that Snape will not take offence.

Snape smirks. "And without the guidance of my lessons, I suppose you think that means your goals remain your own."

Percy does not reply.

"I will give you one piece of advice," Snape says, picking his quill up again. "You are reading many of the same signs as I, I suppose, and trying in your inept way to prepare for what is next to come. The safest approach for you is to not attract anyone's notice, whether they are a Light or a Dark wizard. You are not a great wizard, nor do I believe you have the ability to become one, but there is safety in mediocrity, and you would do well to learn that lesson sooner than later."

Any good feeling invoked, however briefly, by Snape's willingness to discuss his understanding of magic with Percy immediately dissipates, and he scowls.

"I do not believe I will have that choice, but I thank you for your insight," Percy snaps. Recognising from the flare of Snape's nose that he has strayed indelibly into rudeness, Percy

inclines his head, hitches his bag higher on his shoulder, and flees before Snape can do something like assign him detention, or insult him further.

***

Ron is horrified when he learns that Percy is planning on visiting Draco in the Hospital Wing, which is exactly why Percy informs him on his way *out* of the Common Room.

"And you're bringing him *gifts*?" Ron moans.

"One chocolate frog does not constitute a bountiful array of gifts," Percy says, amused. "Although, I must admit I did write him a card."

"It's Malfoy. *Malfoy*. 'Scum of the Earth' Malfoy, remember? He hates us, Percy!"

Percy shrugs nonchalantly. "He hates *you*, I hear. *We* get along reasonably well."

Ron huffs and stops tagging after him, forcing Percy to stop as well in the middle of the corridor. "I dunno why I even bother with you," he says scathingly. "It's clear that you wish you were one of them more than you like being one of us."

"Ron—" Percy begins, but the chiding edge in his voice must outweigh the conciliatory tone he was trying to adopt, as Ron simply rolls his eyes and darts away.

Percy walks the rest of the way to the Hospital Wing, seething.

Draco is ill after being attacked by a dangerous creature, and Ron cannot get over his blind hatred of the boy enough to feel sorry for a classmate. That kind of emotion is crippling—it makes one weak, and Percy has no intention of being weak.

Draco is alone, making a desultory effort at flipping through a textbook. He looks incredibly bored and incredibly young, dark circles under his pale grey eyes.

"Draco," Percy says in greeting, striding in confidently.

Draco looks up. His expression remains carefully neutral. "Weasley."

"I think this is one of the rare occasions where it may pain you less to call a classmate by his first name instead of his last," Percy says, extending the card and the chocolate frog.

Draco takes both and even manages a glimmer of a smile. "Percy, then. Thank you for the gifts. I shall inform my father of your concern."

That was, to be fair, half of the reason Percy wanted to bring Draco something. The other half was that Draco is a thirteen year old boy who was attacked by a wild animal. "I came to see how you were doing," he says, sitting in the free chair. "Truly an unacceptable breach in

safety. I never took Care of Magical Creatures myself; I'm surprised you are. I never really saw the point, to be honest."

Draco shrugs. "Most everyone takes it, and it's better than Divination."

Percy, who dropped Divination gladly after his fifth year, nods emphatically. "You ought to try Arithmancy, though."

"I'm in Ancient Runes right now, but I thought taking that with Arithmancy would be a bit much," Draco says, before he flushes, just a little. It always impresses Percy how different his peers are at Hogwarts, rather than with their parents. Alone in the Hospital Wing, Draco seems like a normal schoolboy, rather than the heir to the Malfoy line.

Percy does not let him feel embarrassed. "May I suggest dropping the class with Hagrid? I have no doubt you could handle both Ancient Runes and Arithmancy, and I know Professor Vector will tutor any student who has the courage to ask for it."

"It wouldn't be—" Draco cuts off abruptly.

"I would not be ashamed to drop Care of Magical Creatures, no," Percy says, intuiting correctly what Draco fears. "Anyway, don't you have your mother's political genius? I'm sure you can think of some cutting things to say about the class to cover your faux pas."

Draco grins quite cheerfully. "Hagrid *is* a half-blood."

"That's just going for the low-hanging fruit," Percy says teasingly. "I expect better of you."

Draco goes from smiling to cold so quickly that Percy feels rather thrown. He narrows his eyes and is every inch Lucius in miniature. "Why are you so nice to me?"

Percy spreads his hands and does not look away. "Sometimes we are born with families we do not always want," he says honestly. "I think we can both understand that."

Draco bristles but does not deny it. Percy did not think he would. Being Lucius Malfoy's son is as much as a curse as it is a blessing, and the Dark Lord has not even returned yet. "Well, one of us is a Weasley, and the other one of us has money and honour, so I think I still got the better bargain."

"Weasley-Prewett, haven't you heard?" Percy asks lightly, not allowing the thirteen year old to get under his skin. "You do have the edge financially, though. I doubt any family in Britain can come close to the Malfoy vault."

"The Black vault, too. I'm the heir-apparent, did you know? Although with Sirius Black on the loose, who knows what will happen."

Percy hadn't known Draco was the heir-apparent to the Black family. Technically it should be Tonks, though with Andromeda's exclusion from the family tree, Draco would be next in line.

"Do you know why Black escaped?" Percy asks curiously.

Draco shrugs one shoulder. “I’m just hoping he’s come to finish the job with Potter.” Percy gives him a look. It’s the Head Boy look he copied from Bill and then later perfected. Draco resists it for as long as he can before he rolls his eyes. “Well, I hope he at least gives Potter a fright.”

“That’s better,” Percy says. He stands and straightens the chair beside the bedside. “Think about Arithmancy, Draco. You’ve got quite the mind. I’d like to see you use it some time.”

One good deed done for the day.

***

Dear Percy,

I have struggled to write this letter. It has become apparent to me that I do not know you as well as I thought I did. That my own son would be so dissatisfied with his family to seek out another saddens me greatly.

I know the kind of company Great Aunt Muriel expects you to keep now. Andromeda Tonks at least believes in the same ideals as we do, but she did not fight in the war. She was not part of the Order. Never forget who her own siblings are.

But Andromeda is just the tip of the iceberg, I'm afraid. Percy, you are young and impulsive. I know you have been embarrassed of us: of our thriftiness, our values. We raised you with love, Percy, and a large family. That is worth more than all the riches in the world, all the societal acceptance.

Percy, I was raised in the Prewett family. My brothers were meant to be heirs. The society you want to be part of is not kind. It is not welcoming. They will scrutinise your every move and judge your every mistake. If you think your father and I are restrictive, imagine a whole country of overbearing society mothers and their opinions. Who you love, what you believe in, even what you wear—all of this becomes their decision, not yours.

I beg you, Percy. Renounce the Prewett name and all the pressure it entails. If you want to be great, be a great Weasley. If you think the world is discounting you, prove them wrong.

Love,

Mum

***

My mother is angry at me, Percy writes angrily in his diary that night.

Why?

You know my family is not...well respected, he replies. *Everyone judged my mother for marrying my father, since she was more respected than he.*

Yes, you've said. Percy, you really ought to keep that information to yourself. Not all will be as accepting as me.

Most people aren't, Tom. Well, I have a great aunt who is heir to another pureblood family, and she has no heirs of her own.

Ah, I see where this is going. Clever.

Thank you, Tom. Yes, I admit I have been cultivating her over the past few years.

And your mother is jealous?

I cannot see why. She would have been the heir, had she not renounced the title when she married my father.

Regret can drive a man mad. A woman too.

Percy thinks about that. Maybe his mother *is* jealous. It makes sense; she graduated from Hogwarts and lost her brothers and married Arthur and had a child all within the span of a few short years. His mother is as hot headed as the rest of the Weasleys. If Aunt Muriel and Molly were the last two Prewetts, he can easily see how sparks could fly.

Perhaps you're right.

Do not let her talk you down, or convince you to let her back into that bloodline, Tom advises.

I don't think it's likely at all that she'll ask.

She will. And when she does, remind her that she has lost her chance at greatness; that you will take responsibility for the continued honour and prosperity of the name.

***

He begins to spend most of his time in the Room of Hidden Things. He *knows* the diadem is here; the Grey Lady told him directly. Last term he held the Sword of Gryffindor in his hands. He knows the diadem is real.

He's divided the room into sixteen quadrants, marked with faintly glowing lines. In each quadrant he has categorised and itemised each object. He was hoping to then sort the room, but that is increasingly looking to be unlikely.

What he has settled on is a form of tagging system, with different colours and letters designating category, usefulness estimate, value estimate, and threat level. Old Quidditch robes, for instance, are labelled as *Sports Equipment—not useful—no resale value—benign.* Some of the more interesting artefacts, like the Potions stirrer that looks to be made of erumpent horn, merit a different classifications. Others he takes for himself without comment and stores in his extra trunk.

Nevertheless, he simply cannot find the diadem. He has explored eight of the sixteen quadrants, and he is uncomfortably aware he is pressed for time. He *knows* the diadem is here; he just has to be clever enough to find it.

Percy had calculated the most efficient route through the quadrants, optimising for breadth and depth of search. He'd started in the back, reasoning that Tom would not be so foolish to hide something so valuable within easy reach.

(*Have you ever been to the Room of Hidden Things, Tom?*

No, I can't say I have found that particular spot. What is it, may I ask?

I think it's some sort of repository of lost items.

Probably just years of accumulated junk.)

He's found several coins, all of which he's kept; his pile of gold in Gringotts is considerable due to the experiments with the Philosopher's Stone, but he does have need for smaller denominations than pure gold.

(*I opened my first Gringotts vault over the summer. I won't lie; it felt victorious.*

I have not yet opened a vault. Filthy goblins want a sponsoring wizard if you are not of age. I imagine I did so shortly after my seventeenth birthday.

Did you expect to receive a watch that was very valuable?

Why a watch?)

Potions equipment; books he's added to his collection; several bound notebooks with failed or rejected research proposals.

(*Did you want to stay for an apprenticeship?*

Nobody at Hogwarts had anything more to teach me, though the thought of tormenting Dumbledore did appeal.

I hate that he is still Headmaster.

I would advise you not to attract his attention further. We both know Dumbledore is not nearly as benevolent as he appears.)

And yet, no diadem.

***

Dear Mother:

I am hurt, to say the least, by the series of erroneous and insulting assumptions that you continue to make about me. I originally went to visit Aunt Muriel to learn more about the history and legacy of Light families. I believe there is value to be gained in looking to our forefathers. I enjoy learning about history, about culture, about my family—all of it. Father's mother was a Black. So was Nymphadora Tonks' mother. That isn't something to be embarrassed of or proud of in and of itself, but I wanted to learn more about our grandparents, our great-grandparents, and make my mind up for myself.

I am proud to be a Weasley. I am grateful for all that you and Father have done to create an environment in which my siblings and I could grow up together, without the restrictive boundaries of society that you faced as a child.

But when Aunt Muriel spoke to me, I realised that she has been cut out of that circle. You are her only living relative; I do not believe you have visited her for several years. We have no living grandparents; she is the closest thing that we have to an elder tying us to our past.

She does not want the Prewett name to die. There are six other Weasleys who can help carry on the Weasley name. I wish to be one of them—but I also wish to help Aunt Muriel in this way.

I cannot understand why you assume the worst. I cannot understand why you would not support me in this endeavour. If it is about money, then ask—I need not the contents of the Prewett vault. If it is about jealousy, then I understand that you may regret the impetuous actions you took at my age. You are a Prewett too. This is something that we could do together.

Yours,

Percy

***

Mum wrote back, he writes savagely to Tom. *You were right. She wants the money for herself.*

Our families are our biggest weakness.

He hesitates before he writes again, but he's only writing to Tom, and Tom will not judge him for saying, *Sometimes I want to make them suffer. Does that make me crazy?*

On the contrary, you are beginning to see clearly.

Did you make your family suffer, Tom?

You already know the answer to that, Percy.

***

"Are you still writing to him, Percy?"

Percy gives Ginny a bland look. "Of course not, Ginny. I told you; the diary was lost."

"It's just that—you look a bit pale again," Ginny says nervously, twisting her fork in her hand.

Percy furrows his brow and carefully touches the back of his hand to his forehead. "I will avail myself of Madam Pomfrey this weekend, Ginny."

"Ginny, sit with us," Ron says from further down the table. He shoots Percy a dark look. "No point talking to *him*."

Percy rolls his eyes. Ginny scowls and tugs her plate closer to herself, ignoring Ron. "He's been unbearable this year," Ginny huffs. "He and Hermione fight about their pets *all the time*. Lavender told me she's been *crying*."

Percy is suddenly alert. "What is Ron doing to Scabbers?"

"I think he's just at the end of his life, to be honest," Ginny says, quite unconcerned with the eventual demise of her brother's pet. When one grows up on a farm, one is not overly sentimental in regards to animals. "Ron doesn't want to admit it. Scrabbers keeps trying to run away. *I* think he is looking for a quiet way to die that doesn't involve meeting the end of Crookshanks' teeth."

It is beginning, then. Pettigrew is beginning to feel afraid. Black would soon follow, and at his heels, the Dark Lord.

REVELATIONS (2/4)

Chapter Notes

> As always, I've really enjoyed hearing all of your thoughts! Buckle in. We're really steaming ahead now.
>
> Please lmk if these chapters are too long. I cut out some of the extra "Percy just living his life" type of scenes in the earlier chapters because I thought they were dragging on a bit too much, but I kept more of them in for these later chapters. I can tighten them up a bit though if that's the feedback I'm getting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER SEVEN: REVELATIONS (2/4)

1993—1994 (Percy is 17 & 30, Harry is 13, Ginny is 12, Tom is still 16, and Sirius Black and Severus Snape are 33)

As October winds down, Percy finds to his surprise that these last few months at Hogwarts seem to be slipping away with worrying speed. He does not *think* he is being possessed; he continues to meet regularly with Myrtle, and she watches him write to Tom, though he does not admit to her that he often continues writing late at night, curled around the diary in the privacy of his bed. He does not feel guilty about the evasion; he's set up enough monitoring charms to know that he does not leave the vicinity of his four posters, and Myrtle, for all of her intelligence, is often uncomfortable with the lines that Percy must deliberately cross to keep Tom engaged.

Therefore, he has to conclude that time seems to be accelerating merely due to his own inability to keep it in his grasp. Even without his Head Boy duties, seventh year is *exceedingly* busy, least of all because Percy has decided to receive all Outstandings, and Landon has taken that as a personal affront.

"Second in your year is nothing to be ashamed of," Percy tells Landon more than once, who always rolls his eyes. Given that Percy came *third* in his year the first time, beaten both by Landon and a fiendishly determined Slytherin witch, Percy feels qualified to reassure Landon with equanimity. Landon seems to find this condescending, regardless of the tone Percy uses, which makes Percy at times annoyed.

On this particular occasion, the boys are in the Ravenclaw common room, proof-reading each other's seventh year project proposals under the eagle eye of Rowena Ravenclaw. Landon has decided to write his for Charms, whereas Percy has chosen Arithmancy and Ancient Runes.

"If you weren't *already* such a bloody swot, doing your final in two simultaneous subjects would undoubtedly qualify you," Landon informs Percy snidely, though the twist of his lips is more playful than rude, so Percy does not take offense. Landon has been prickly lately, though Percy privately doesn't know what Landon has to be so stressed about, given that even if he weren't coming second in his year, Tobias Greengrass undoubtedly would have some idea of how to remedy the situation and find some way for Landon to secure gainful employment.

Percy shrugs airily. "We cannot all excel in such erudite, complicated subjects, I suppose," he tosses back lightly, already on the fourth scroll of Landon's. "Some of us have to rely on *Charms*."

Sonali laughs and threads her foot around Landon's calf when he looks up, fake-outraged. Percy has been disguising his reluctance to take tutelage with Flitwick, whose eyes always seem to track Percy a little too closely, as a general disdain for the frivolousness of Charms, which never fails to rile up Landon.

Landon deflates instantly and beams at Sonali instead. Percy rolls his eyes, though without heat. He supposes Sonali is as good as a partner as any for Landon; the Agarwal family is old and respected and typically neutral in Wizarding wars, and Sonali is certainly sharp—and patient—enough to put up with Landon.

"Your proposal is rather interesting," Sonali says to Percy. "I don't know any Light rituals, but you're right, there's no reason they ought to be less powerful than the average Dark ritual."

Percy nods. He figures that creating his own Light ritual cannot possibly be misconstrued as a dangerous interest, and it *is* rather interesting. He hasn't mentioned it to Tom, whom he imagines would have a different idea as to what would merit a good seventh year project.

"Perhaps you ought to consider Light and Dark magic," Sonali tells Landon.

Landon frowns thoughtfully and scrabbles a note in the margin of his parchment. "I don't think we really consider whether a Charm is light or Dark," he says doubtfully. "I'm not sure there *is* a meaningful distinction. Isn't it all just political?"

"No," says Percy, with some authority. He repeats what Snape had told him: that Dark magic relies on strength, and Light magic on self-awareness.

"Even though Snape hates your guts these days, you're still his favourite student," says Landon, shaking his head. "I can't even imagine asking him for help on my potion, let alone to discuss the distinction between Dark and Light magic."

"Why does he hate you these days?" Sonali asks, interested.

Percy shrugs his shoulders and tries not to glower too blackly. "He's decided I am too mediocre for him to continue to waste time on, I suppose."

"That's idiotic," Landon says loyally. "Even though I'm going to beat you on your NEWTs, you're the biggest swot Hogwarts has ever seen. He'd be a fool not to teach you."

Percy waves this aside. "You'd better fix your proposal if you want a shot even at second," he says instead. "It's riddled with logical fallacies and leaps of inference."

Sonali grins and nudges Landon. "Much like the study of Charms."

"*Leaps of inference*," repeats Landon in a huff, reaching over Sonali to grab the bundle of parchment from Percy. "You wouldn't know a logical proof if it danced in front of you wearing the Sorting Hat. Gryffindors, you know; all bite, no substance. Begone, intruder, I have no further need of you."

Percy grins and stands, gathering his own parchment and neatly rolling it together. "Have you need of lunch, or are you planning on finding an exception to Gamp's Law in addition to creating a permanent Charm?"

"That will be my next foray, of course, after I've become a well-reknowned Unspeakable," Landon says loftily. "But you made a good point, Sonali. Maybe a Dark charm, powered by strength, *would* be permanent. Certainly worth looking into, I'd say."

Sonali winks at Percy and slips her hand into Landon's as they make their way to lunch. Percy had earlier scheduled this time to speak with Tom, but he figures that an hour delay can't hurt, and if they continue working on their proposals he can mark the time down as productive, so there's no reason to feel guilty.

***

Tom looks incredibly focused while casting the Patronus. He likely chose to show this memory to intimidate Percy, to insult him, but the hard set of his face, the way his fingers clench around his wand, the translucent quality of the mist shaping into a large python all serve to inform Percy that this is not a spell that comes easily to Tom.

It's in striking contrast to Tom's easy, feline elegance when he's demonstrating to Percy the Darker spells that he knows. Tom can cast an Imperius wandlessly and nonverbally; he can, with a lazy wave of his wand, send a controlled lick of fire to dance perilously close to Nott's ears; he can disembowel a mouse with a single precise spell.

But the Patronus—it seems to challenge him like it does Percy.

***Easy as that*,** Tom's voice echoes in his head.

Is there any magic you can't do? Percy huffs back uncharitably. Tom is half his age. He shouldn't be able to cast circles around Percy.

Tom chuckles. ***Not yet.***

I don't believe that. Percy watches the silvery serpent wind its way across the room. On memory-Tom's face, there's something like delight. *There's got to be some magic that*

bewilders even you, Tom. The Lightest magic...or the Darkest.

The Patronus is one of the Lightest, wouldn't you say?

Then the Darkest magic, Percy says. He hopes that whatever form of Tom that exists in this memory cannot see the way his forehead begins to gently perspire. *What's the Darkest magic you can do?*

Tom chuckles again, and it reverberates through Percy's head. ***I'm not sure you're ready for that.***

Please, Tom. I'm tired of feeling weak. Percy lets his frustration with his mother, his anger at Snape's condescension, the uncertainty with his future bleed through. *Show me something.*

He feels Tom considering it. ***Why don't we see the basilisk?*** Tom suggests slyly, and before Percy can react, he's whisked them both away to another memory.

The basilisk rears its great, horned head, and Percy shouts and ducks before he can help himself.

Its gaze won't kill you in a memory, Tom says derisively as Percy sees himself walk up to the basilisk and hold out a hand.

He stares, fascinated, as memory-Percy opens his mouth and unleashes a string of unintelligible hisses.

Such a good follower, Tom whispers, and it feels like he is behind Percy, an invisible hand resting on his shoulder. ***So obedient, so loyal, so capable.***

Percy does not know whether Tom is referring to himself or the basilisk.

He watches in mute silence as his past self turns on his heel and strides down the corridor, the basilisk following obediently behind. While he knows he ought to feel disgust or fear, he cannot help but, for the briefest second, enjoy the sight of this most terrible creature cowed into submission.

Tom, where is the basilisk now?

She's gone back to sleep, I expect, Tom says idly. ***That's part of her magic. She will sleep until an Heir wakes her up to do his bidding.***

Percy and the basilisk turn the corner and come across Colin, kneeling and fiddling with his camera.

Even though Percy knows Colin was unharmed, he tenses as Colin looks up and processes what is happening.

Another filthy Mudblood, Tom breathes. ***She always knows. She can smell the taint in their blood.***

Do you really believe all Mudbloods are inferior? Percy thinks back shakily, struck by the bravery of Colin, who seems to ignore Percy and shakily raises his camera to his eyes.

It saves him, but what kind of fool sees a basilisk and moves to take a picture?

Perhaps not, Tom allows. ***But it is efficient messaging, and she really does smell the difference in blood.***

Memory-Percy is unruffled at the sight of an eleven year old boy Petrified and merely barks a command at the basilisk, who turns disappointedly away from its prize. They continue walking down the corridor together, and then Tom ends the memory.

Percy tumbles back out onto his bed and blinks, disoriented. He checks the time: it has been an hour since Tom pulled him into the first memory. The wards on his curtain inform him that he has not left the confines of his bed.

You did well, Tom writes. ***That is power, Percy. Commanding other beings; serving in a greater cause.***

Controlling a Basilisk isn't Dark Magic, Percy writes back. *I have surmised you are a descendant of Slytherin, Tom. One could argue you are merely employing a family ability.*

You dare, Tom writes back, and suddenly writing fills the page. ***You dare mock my ability, you dare impugn my family name? You are nothing, Percy, a half blood who cannot master neither Dark nor Light magic. The closest you will ever be to power is kneeling at my feet.***

Percy has to take several deep breaths to bat back the indignation. He cannot let Tom win now.

You are right, he scratches back instead. *I am nothing compared to you, Tom. But it is not you I am seeking to have power over.*

When Tom doesn't reply, Percy adds another line.

It would be my honour to kneel at your feet, my Lord.

***

"I would caution you against relying too heavily on this idea of balance," Professor McGonagall muses, looking at his latest submission. "The distinction between Light and Dark Magic is not nearly as clear as you would like to believe. Take this section, for instance. Why in Merlin's name would we believe without further proof that Light spells will counter Dark, and vice versa?"

"I thought you agreed that magic has balance," Percy says, injured.

"Oh, certainly I agree," Professor McGonagall says, withdrawing her wand. "Nothing is truly created nor destroyed; conjuring is merely an advanced form of Transfiguration, based upon the matter in the air and the ability of the caster to force a physical cast on her magic." She flicks her wand and a quill appears, hovering in the air. "I even agree with your radical proposition that what can be 'created'—insofar as we agree that you can use your magic to pull something into existence—can be destroyed, though I dislike those particular words, given how they seem to contradict our first axiom of magic. What I do not understand is your insistence that Light magic can inherently destroy what Dark magic creates."

"But Light magic is the opposite of Dark magic," Percy insists.

"What of elemental theory? Fire, water, air, earth—properties fundamental to our way of life."

Percy purses his lips, thinking of this. “I think the Dark / Light magic divide is just another form of this.”

Professor McGonagall nods, banishing the quill. "Let’s begin with a simple example; neutral, if you will. I will give you thirty seconds to think of a spell to defeat my *Augementi*."

Fiendfyre, the imagined voice of Tom urges.

No, he protests, but he hears the ghost of Tom’s chuckle in his head, a lick of impulsivity in his chest, and then he's casting *Fiendfyre* at the sight of the gush of water coming from her wand.

The fire from his wand takes the shape of a basilisk, horned and eager. It hisses at the water and opens its jaws wide, swallowing it in an easy gulp before looking around hungrily. Sweat beads on his shoulders, and the magic that lays dormant along his arms sparks to life. The basilisk rears its head, Percy’s magic flowing up its fiery scales and adorning its crown.

"Mr. Weasley, reign that in *right now*," McGonagall barks, but Percy cannot will the basilisk back, cannot communicate with it like in his memories. In his head, Tom laughs wickedly, and Percy flinches away from the sound.

Professor McGonagall hisses as the basilisk lunges at her. She casts a spell Percy cannot name—and then a second later he finds himself kneeling on the floor, gasping for breath, his wand beside him. He's dizzy, the oxygen seemingly sucked from the air.

The basilisk whines and fizzles out, starved.

McGonagall releases him from the spell and he pants for a few seconds, massaging at his chest. His ears are ringing from the roar of the basilisk, and the sudden silence is deafening.

"Foolish, Mr. Weasley," she says tartly. "I am not naïve enough to imagine you have not experimented with Dark magic. But Fiendfyre is dangerous, and as you can see, uncontrollable. The further affront is that your little display did nothing to prove your point; in fact, I would argue it eroded your credibility."

"Why," Percy gasps, still on his hands and knees, unable to stand, rattled by the sound of Tom's chuckle in the back of his mind.

"Because I cast a neutral spell, and you responded with Dark magic. I defeated your Dark spell not with Light magic but with another neutral spell; one that thins the air. If anything, that would be considered Dark. What influenced the battle were not considerations of Dark or Light magic, but of magical congruence; fire against water, air against fire. Elemental theory."

"So if you had a dangerous Dark object," Percy says, his mind whirring despite the continued wheeze in his chest. He pushes himself to his feet with difficulty. "Let's say, something created with the Darkest ritual, I dunno, with blood or death or something. You wouldn't go with the Lightest ritual to defeat it?"

Professor McGonagall does not react to his odd line of questioning. She is used to his hypotheticals by now. "No." She shakes her head. "I would consider what gave that object power. Is it the ritual used to create it: the perversion of human life, for instance? Is it the object itself, the magical properties therein? And then you may use your theory of congruence to consider what may limit that power."

Percy picks up his wand from where it rolled on the floor and looks at it consideringly.

Perhaps his initial idea to burn the diary into ash was a good one.

***

Halloween seems to come early, this year, though of course in modern calendars the date does not strictly change. Still, Percy feels like he has just blinked and it is already the end of October, chilly and dark. Myrtle informs him that after last year's debacle, the ghosts are having a closed Death Day feast. It does not matter; if all goes according to last year's timeline, Sirius Black will make an attempt on the school, so he has no intention of letting Ron and the rest out of his sight. After a moment's hesitation, he motions Ginny over as well, and then even hails Fred and George. He wants them all where he can see them.

George slides in next to Percy and cheerfully offers him a candy. "Happy Halloween, Percy."

"I will give you one Galleon a year if you never give me any of your products," Percy says, rolling his eyes and digging in his pockets.

Ron scowls. "Rich now, are we?"

Fred leans over and takes the Galleon. "You're safe until January first," he says and taps the coin against Percy's glass. "Cheers, mate."

Percy considers protesting, and then decides not to engage with the twins. He has enough money now that he can afford to pay an inflated price to his brothers. He will view it as an

investment in their business.

“Why *do* you have money now?” Ron continues doggedly, reaching around Fred for the plate of chicken.

Percy pushes the steamed broccoli in his direction. When Ron ignores it, Percy takes the opportunity to ladle a few stems on his brother’s plate before repeating the action with Ginny’s. “We all get the same pocket money, as meagre as it is,” Percy says evenly. “I choose to save it instead of blowing it on Hogsmeade candy. How was the trip, anyway? Harry, Hermione, was it your first time to the village?”

Harry pokes moodily at his wild rice. “I didn’t go. My uncle didn’t sign the permission slip.”

Fred and George exchange a glance. “Now, Harrikins, you cannot let that stop you,” George says, leaning around Percy to give Harry a friendly punch to his forearm.

Fred nods sagely. “We can show you how to sneak out. It’s easy, for such veritable pranksters as myself and Fred, here.”

“Why didn’t you show me the passageways?” Ron demands.

“Are they safe?” Hermione is close on his heels.

George laughs and returns to his plate. “Ron, does your guardian prevent you from attending Hogsmeade? I think not.”

“And my dear Hermione, I assure you the passageways themselves are perfectly safe,” Fred takes up the thread. “What the mischief maker may do *with* the passageways is their own purview.”

Well, bollocks, Percy needs to give Harry the Map. He has the original in his bag; he’s been meaning to hand it over, but hasn't found the right time. He’ll give Harry the Map later, though, when there is less of an audience.

***

It happens like Percy remembers: a piercing shriek, a cry from the surrounding portraits, a confused mass of teenagers. Except it is Henry that leads the way to the front of the crowd, who clears the way for the Headmaster. Henry is Head Boy this year, the badge gleaming gold on his chest, and Percy cannot help but resent it despite himself.

The Weasleys and their carry-ons gather near Percy in the Great Hall, uncharacteristically quiet. Harry, Ron, and Hermione keep shooting each other urgent glances as George and Percy try to comfort a sniffling Ginny.

“How do you think he got in, then?” Fred says, his eyes alight. “Got to be one of the passageways.”

“You really ought to tell the Headmaster about those,” Hermione says disapprovingly. “They’re not safe.”

Fred shrugs one shoulder. “Dumbledore must know about them. I saw him emerging from behind the statue of the one-eyed witch once. I imagine he’s guarding them.”

“So then how would Sirius Black get in?” Hermione persists, narrowing her eyes. “The only logical explanation in that case would be that the Headmaster wants to allow Black to break in.”

“Maybe he’s hoping to catch him,” Ron says. He nudges Harry. “Enjoy being the bait, do you?”

Harry looks up, his eyebrows furrowed. “Why would I be the bait? Aside from, you know, my entire life.”

Even Percy has to grin at this, though he is mildly confused. Does Harry not know about Sirius Black? It is not a particularly well-kept secret that Black allegedly betrayed the Potters. Most of the purebloods at Hogwarts would know. Harry should know; he ought to know.

Percy wars with himself over whether to tell Harry, but he eventually decides against it. Presumably Harry learns the story at some convenient time for him. Instead, he decides to pursue a course he has been contemplating for a while. “Harry, I couldn’t help but notice you are not taking any extra classes,” he says delicately.

“Bet you could,” Fred whispers to George.

Percy soldiers on. “It would be remiss of me not to encourage it,” he says. Perhaps this is changing the timeline, but he hates the idea of skinny and short Harry Potter, thirteen without any magical abilities to his name, confronting the Dark Lord alone. Tom would eat him alive.

“Not everyone is a swot, Percy,” Ron groans. “Could you give it a rest?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Percy snaps back. “Did you think that *Harry Potter*, saviour of the Wizarding World, would not benefit from extra lessons? Do you think his enemies will battle him with third-year spells?”

“It’s a good point, actually,” Hermione says thoughtfully. “And the extra lessons *are* rather interesting. You could take Defence, Harry. Professor Lupin’s quite good.”

Percy should really take Defence, though he is still stung by Lupin’s dismissive summarization of his problem on the train.

“I spoke to Lupin today, actually,” Harry says musingly. “He knew my parents, did you know that? They were friends in school.”

“Oh, Harry, you should *definitely* ask him,” Hermione says mistily.

Ron looks rather put out. “Maybe I should ask him too.”

“What would you want to study, Ronniekins?” Fred says teasingly. “The study of food isn’t on the syllabus.”

Luckily, Dumbledore enters the Great Hall, cutting off what could threaten to be quite the argument.

“Sirius Black tried to break into Gryffindor Tower,” he announces ceremoniously. Percy watches Harry flush as all attention swings to him. “He was unable to make it past the guards at the entrance. I entreat you to not succumb to fear: Hogwarts can and will protect you from harm.”

Percy sees students exchange looks. He is glad he is not the only one that does not trust the honeyed assurances dripping from Dumbledore’s lips. Even those that were not aware of Quirrell’s possession would remember the basilisk.

“All students will sleep here tonight, while the professors evaluate the defences of the school,” Dumbledore continues, waving his wand to create hundreds of squashy purple sleeping bags. Percy takes his with the same lack of enthusiasm as he did previously, though he has to admit that he is impressed with Dumbledore’s casual display of magical ability. To conjure in replicate is a difficult skill.

Why not *beds*? Percy grumbles to himself as he casts a cushioning charm beneath his sleeping bag. Although, he realises as the buzz of excited conversation fills the hall, sleeping bags make the whole thing feel rather like an adventure. There are significantly fewer tearful faces than one might expect, given a mass murderer broke into the school.

He settles his siblings into lines and then lays on his side and watches Snape glower at Lupin. Not for the first time, he longs to know the story behind that enmity. *Did* Lupin let in Sirius Black? Percy feels as though the odds are fairly high; he does not know the entire story with Black, but he knows perfectly well that Lupin moves in with Black in a few years’ time. If he were Black—and if he had friends—the first thing he would do upon his mistake is down a vial of Veritaserum and reveal himself to said friends.

Snape catches Percy watching and raises a mocking eyebrow.

Frowning, Percy turns away.

***

November 1993

The next morning, on the way out of the Great Hall, Percy pulls Harry aside. Ron and Hermione, swept up in an argument with George, do not notice, though Ginny gives them both a curious glance.

“Er, Harry, I wanted to give you something,” Percy says, feeling his palms grow sweaty. “I am cataloguing a series of artefacts for Professor McGonagall, some of which are objects confiscated from past students, and I found something I believe you should have.”

Harry looks curiously as Percy pulls out the Marauder's Map. “This was your father’s,” he says and watches Harry’s eyes soften and grow wide with longing. He hands it over and Harry holds it reverently. No matter that it looks like a dirty piece of parchment; Harry looks like Percy handed him his parents’ marriage records.

Percy has added one enchantment to the Map: a very mild *Notice Me Not* tied to the name Peter Pettigrew, set to activate whenever Pettigrew’s dot crosses with Ron’s. He does not know exactly when Harry figures the rat out, but he knows it is toward the end of the term, if Ron’s broken leg is any indication. If Harry is looking for the name *Peter Pettigrew* or concentrating intently, it should not prevent him from noticing Pettigrew’s name. Only if Harry is casually scanning for Ron.

“It is a map of the castle,” Percy explains. “A fine display of magic. Place your wand and say the words, *I solemnly swear I am up to no good.*”

Harry grins around the hint of tears gathering in his eyes. *“I solemnly swear I am up to no good.”*

Hogwarts materialises, a twist of inky lines branching from the middle. At first glance, it is not immediately obvious that the jumble of boxes represent the rooms of the castle, but Harry has years now to figure it out. Percy points out their dots next to the Great Hall. “It shows everyone in Hogwarts. Your father broke into the Headmaster’s office to place a spell on the registrar.”

“He was a criminal?” There is something in Harry’s voice, a hard note on the word *criminal* that hints at some association with the word that Percy does not care to know.

“No, no,” Percy says hastily. “A prankster, like Fred and George. Here, say *Mischief Managed,* like that, yes, and now place your wand on the parchment and try to say something else.”

Harry frowns but obediently clears the Map. "Er…what should I say?"

"Try *Revelio,"* Percy suggests.

Messers Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs would like to inquire as to why a boy with such horrendously messy hair would dare speak to the Marauders, men of unparalleled class and taste.

Harry blinks at it for a second before a wide grin crosses his face. "*Brilliant*," he breathes. "It can see me?"

"Not quite," Percy says. "It's a very complicated layering of spells. Your wand passes the Map an imprint of you, let's say. You'll notice after a while the insults are structurally similar; the magic fills in small details, like insulting your hair or my freckles."

Percy had considered, for a while, that the Map was something less benign than enchanted parchment. When Percy had first been unravelling its secrets, he'd at times thought *Horcrux*. The Marauders Map is honestly one of the most brilliant things he's ever seen. No wonder Professor McGonagall still speaks fondly of James. He wonders why James' magical aptitude didn't pass down to his son. Perhaps Harry's upbringing in the Muggle world?

"You should talk to Professor McGonagall sometime," Percy recommends. "She told me that she wanted to offer your father an apprenticeship. Don't mention the Map, though; strictly speaking I wasn't meant to, er, abscond with it."

"Thanks, Percy," Harry says seriously. He pauses and then says in a rush, "You should talk to Ron, his feelings are just hurt, he doesn't really hate you."

"Oh, I, uh, know," Percy says, taken aback. "Ron takes things very personally. But thank you, Harry. I will."

Harry mutters something around his crimson cheeks and flees. Percy is feeling rather warm. And his brothers don't think he can be nice.

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The Fat Lady—it's a title, not an insult, she corrects Percy, when he hesitates on how to address her—flatly refuses to return to her portrait, rent and flayed by Sirius Black's own hands. She refuses to even *look* at it, preferring instead to flit around the other portraits, dramatically retelling the story of the break-in, and generally causing a bit of a nuisance. More than once, one of Percy's classes is interrupted by her dulcet tones or loud laugh, and more than once, Percy watches the original of the occupant quite rudely push her out.

It isn't that the Fat Lady is particularly unlikeable, he learns when he asks his house ghost, but rather that portraits are rather possessive of their frames and do not welcome long-term visitors. It answers a question Percy had wondered, back in the days when he'd been studying portraiture with more intensity. Given that many of the portraits have hung on Hogwarts' walls for hundreds of years, Percy would think they would get bored with their small frame and frequently reside elsewhere, if only for the novelty.

"No, portraits like their own spaces," says Nicholas, and the Fat Lady confirms when he tracks her down, sunning herself in the airy painted savannah hanging a few floors up, animals conspicuously absent.

"For familiarity? Or is there a magical reason?" Percy persists.

The Fat Lady wipes a hand across her forehead, small beads of sweat seeming to linger on her painted face. Percy wonders if portraits sense temperature but bites down on the impulse to ask. "Some portraits feel—uncomfortable, I suppose," she answers thoughtfully. "It feels different to be in other portraits, but I quite like the adventure of it."

"Different *how*." Percy impatiently squeezes the edge of his quill in one hand, murmuring a charm to dissipate an errant blob of ink that drips wetly from the tip.

"Blurry," says the portrait finally, her ruddy cheeks screwed up in thought. "It's better to travel in paintings by the same artist, more familiar."

Interesting. Percy makes a neat note. It seems rather obvious to him that while portraits are magical, they do not generate that magic themselves, nor do they seem to have any type of soul. The portrait artist, as best he can tell, provides the anchor and the transformative force for the animation. "Were you hurt when Black attacked your portrait?"

The Fat Lady pauses and flicks a glance around before lowering her voice. "No," she admits, as if she were ashamed of it. Percy resists the urge to roll his eyes; what a Gryffindor emotion to nurse, guilt that one was not hurt in battle. "We can't feel what happens to our canvases."

"Portraits provide protection, do they not? To the school?"

"Well of course," says the Fat Lady, straightening back up. She brushes some errant grass from her long, voluminous skirt, and Percy watches in some fascination as the yellow blotches of paint fall softly to the bottom of the painting and then disappear. "We are the eyes and ears of this establishment, young man. I've seen you sneaking out of the Common Room often enough. Much like your mother, you are, Mr. Weasley."

"You know my mother?" Percy asks, distracted.

The Fat Lady nods proudly. "Miss Molly Prewett, yes? And your father, Arty Weasley. I remember your mother well; she snuck out nearly every weekend, and even more once she began going steady with your father. Who are *you* sneaking out to meet?"

A Dark Lord, thinks Percy, and this time, he cannot prevent the eye-roll from materialising. "Do you remember every student?"

"Only the memorable ones," reminisces the Fat Lady. "I'll be hard-pressed to forget the Potter boy, let me tell you."

Percy waves the issue of Harry aside. He imagines the portraits will dine off the stories of Harry Potter for years, centuries even, comparing tales long after Harry will leave Hogwarts. "But you don't contribute any *magical* defences to the school," he clarifies. "I heard that the portraits helped to anchor some of the magic. The wards, I mean."

"You're thinking of the portraits of the Headmasters," says the Fat Lady, again in a lowered voice, though he imagines for a rather different reason. She glances around herself nervously again, but Percy waits patiently, and she finally deigns to continue after ascertaining that she

is alone in the savannah and he is alone in the halls. “They’re not quite like us, you know. Rarely leave the Headmaster’s office. They feel—different. Colder.”

“They awaken, don’t they? Once the Headmaster has died?”

The Fat Lady nods and then makes an odd movement that almost looks as if she were drawing an X over her chest. “It’s unnatural,” she breathes, and behind the painted façade of her painted makeup she looks almost frightened. “The portraits are not… *painted*. The frame just appears, I’ve heard, after the Headmaster has died.”

Percy finds later that evening that very little has been recorded about the paintings in the Headmaster’s office. Certainly it seems from what else he could pry from the Fat Lady’s suddenly reticent lips suggests that the Headmaster portraits are of a different type than the normal Wizarding portraits. Some magic of Hogwarts seems to create them, or magic of the Headmasters, or something else entirely.

It is almost as if Hogwarts were sentient itself, or at least capable of some form of growth and change. And why not, if ghosts can learn after death, and portraits can feel the heat of the sun, and suits of armour can creakily bend to pick up a fallen helmet? Percy does not suppose he will ever learn even a fraction of Hogwarts’ many secrets, but he does wish he’d gotten a better look at the portraits in Dumbledore’s office last year. Perhaps if he ever comes back to Hogwarts as an apprentice he’ll be able to learn more.

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Tell me more about Voldemort, Tom says unexpectedly over the weekend.

Percy stares, panicked, and reflexively checks to make sure his bed hangings are still drawn. He and Tom had merely been chatting idly about the brisk fall weather; Percy had been wondering how to introduce the topic of Myrtle without making Tom suspicious. This query immediately puts him on edge.

What do you mean?

In the Chamber last year, you said that you knew of Voldemort, and you suspected he may be me.

He is, isn't he?

He's a form of me, I suppose.

One may say you are a form of him.

Percy feels a chill emanating from the book and shivers. He dips his quill in ink and continues hastily, *Though seeing as you are his origin, perhaps the opposite is true.*

Percy holds his breath, but Tom only replies curtly, ***How did he die?***

What to tell him? Should Percy say that the Dark Lord returned? That he may be out there now? Why does Tom care? What does he want to hear?

A suspicion begins to form in the corner of Percy's brain.

He tried to kill an infant, Percy writes. *Harry Potter. Nobody knows what happened that night, but it is said that Harry survived and he did not.*

Preposterous. Felled by a mere child? That cannot be the whole story.

Perhaps not, Percy allows. *Before that, he was said to be a great and feared wizard.*

Tom's answer is hasty, almost eager. ***What did he do? What feats of magic were his renown?***

Percy thinks about it, but he eventually has to admit, *Honestly, I am not sure. He murdered quite a lot of people.*

Mudbloods?

Some. Muggles too. Light wizards; political enemies. It was a reign of terror.

But did he consolidate power? Pass any laws? Invent new spells or absorb powerful magic?

This is a question, Percy realises with a jolt, that most definitely came from a sixteen year old.

And his previous thought crystallises into a plan.

Not really, no. Percy writes back neatly. *He never took over the Ministry; he had a band of pureblood followers, but I do not think they achieved anything lasting. I heard he was crazy; unstable.*

Unstable how?

Erratic, by the end. As if he were not all there. I've studied him, you know. That's how I knew you were he. It was said that right after school, he disappeared. I believe he—you—went somewhere to study ancient magic, to become unparalleled and unmatched.

It would be a lie to say I have not considered it.

Percy can almost hear Tom's dry chuckle in his ear. He continues, *He started accumulating power. The Knights of Walpurgis. Abraxas, Damien. Your followers remained loyal. But then things began to change, I believe. I've heard whispers of a terrible ritual, something so Dark nobody will dare confirm. He disappeared again, and when he emerged he was not the same.*

Percy thinks of what Voldemort looked like at the end and helpfully continues, *Reptilian features. He had no nose, no lips. Perhaps some kind of ritual involving a snake?*

You lie.

Percy gasps, feeling a force of entry into his mind not unlike Legilimency. He quickly dives for the slim novel that represents his post-war memories in his mind and forces himself to remember reading Dennis Creevey's book, flipping through the photos that Colin had taken and some accumulated from other wizarding photographers. He pulls up one chilling photograph of Voldemort that some intrepid photographer had captured while the wizard was stalking the halls, his long fingers wrapped around his wand, his red eyes flashing.

Through the mental connection Tom forged, Percy feels his acute disgust, his disappointment. It is as he suspected: Tom, at sixteen, fresh off his first murder, expects great things of his future self. The picture Percy is striving to paint is anything but.

A Dark ritual? Percy hears the thin line of panic in Tom's voice, still echoing in his head.

I learned very little, Percy admits. He takes a breath. *There was the word Horcrux, but I could not discern what that is.*

Tom withdraws from Percy's head nearly with more force than he entered it. Percy blinks and downs one of the Headache Draughts he keeps on him at all times, barely reacting to the cloyingly sweet mint taste.

What is a Horcrux, Tom?

He holds his breath. This is a moment where Tom proves that he trusts him, that Percy learns that he is right about his theory: Tom wants to be powerful. He does not want to return only to compete with a Dark Lord gone mad. He wishes to be his own master.

It is a way of achieving immortality, Tom writes. Percy exhales in a gust.

He's going to win this war.

This diary is a Horcrux?

Why do you say that?

Tom...this makes you immortal.

Tom's dry chuckle plays inside Percy's head. ***In a way***, he concedes. ***But I am more than a memory, Percy.***

What are you?

I am his soul, Tom reveals, and Percy has to blink away a sudden onslaught of awed tears.

Tom…

The story comes out, pouring out, as if Tom has been waiting for years to tell somebody. Which, Percy muses, he probably has. ***I killed someone. A girl, a student. I use her death to***

power a ritual meant to guard my soul. If I were to ever die, the diary would be awakened. I would be able to return.

So had Voldemort's initial death been conclusive enough to awaken the Horcrux? Were all the Horcruxes awakened? Was the diary sentient before Harry defeated the Dark Lord? Do the Horcruxes sense the destruction of each other? Or did the Horcruxes need to be interacted with to be awakened?

Percy grabs a piece of parchment and begins scribbling down his thoughts and a transcript of this conversation before it fades.

Tom continues, ***I will have to revise my initial calculations regarding the long-term stability of the dominant soul fragment,*** he writes crisply. ***I am already immortal. I will not waste my chance at absolute power on murdering fools and practicing rituals.***

The diary slams shut of its own accord and Percy sits back, stunned, quill falling from his hands.

If he can play this correctly...if he can turn Tom on Voldemort...he might be able to win the war before it begins.

***

Myrtle loops around in excitement as they sit in the Room of Hidden Things, exhausted from the latest bout of searching, though of course she primarily traced elaborate designs in the air while Percy slowly and methodically indexed each item.

“Percy, this is our chance,” she squeals, accidentally knocking over one of his carefully constructed piles. He glowers at her but does not castigate her; he knows from experience that Myrtle is more likely to cry at the admonition than take it to heart. “You should tell him all sorts of lies.”

“It can’t be obvious,” Percy says, righting the mess with a few careful flicks of his wand. “He won’t believe anything that casts him as weak.”

“Do you think he’ll tell you what the other Horcruxes are?”

“To be honest, Myrtle, I’m not sure he even knows himself.” Percy sighs as he begins to move to the next quadrant. Ten of sixteen. “I fear we are no further than we were.”

“If he tells you how to destroy them, then he’s exposing himself frightfully,” Myrtle says thoughtfully as she hovers unhelpfully overhead, abandoning all pretence of a search. “But I’d worry about bringing all of the Horcruxes together.”

Percy nods in agreement. “First we have to find one,” he says. “We’ll form a plan once we do. Perhaps we can cajole the truth of all of the Horcruxes out of him and then we can

dispose of him."

Myrtle loops until she is upside-down and then squints at Percy from behind her ethereal glasses. "Will you be able to kill him, when you have to?"

Percy stops what he is doing and glares at her. "You think I would not be capable?"

"You have spent nearly two years talking to him," Myrtle points out. "You may falter."

Percy grumbles a response and continues to sort through the piles of junk, absentmindedly tagging them as he goes. She's not entirely incorrect, he supposes; what he has learned from his conversations with Tom is that he is in many ways still a sixteen year old boy. He is cruel and unkind and certainly already plotting the chain of events which will end with hundreds dead and many more wounded and tortured—but he is sixteen, and he is arrogant and clever and, in a way Percy cannot entirely verbalize, deeply insecure.

Fred is nearly sixteen. When Percy was sixteen—both times—he was already plotting how to achieve his own goals, no matter the expense.

"I may struggle," he concedes, "but I *will* complete my mission."

Myrtle looks at him for a while and then wrinkles her nose. "Well, you already know what would happen if you were to die. *Matching bathrooms*, Percy."

Percy huffs a surprised laugh. Nothing like hanging out with a ghost to put some perspective on death.

***

Tom, are you there?

Percy holds his breath, but Tom, after a prolonged silence, responds. ***Yes.***

Are you upset?

Being upset makes one weak, Percy. I am planning my next move.

May I help you?

What do you believe is my plan?

Percy hesitates. This is most definitely a trap. He wars with himself about what to do and then decides, as he often does with Tom, to go with the truth.

It seems likely the Horcruxes contributed to His erratic behaviour, he writes carefully. He pauses, but Tom does not respond. *I believe you would want to...remedy that situation.*

And how do you suggest I do that?

I do not know nearly enough, Percy writes, demurring for now. He does not want to suggest that Tom must destroy the Horcruxes; he needs Tom to trust him with their locations. But equally so he does not want to suggest that Tom keep the Horcruxes intact.

The Horcruxes—meant to be my greatest triumph—now pose a threat to my future. I believe He must have overreached.

Three, seven, or thirteen?

Seven. Come, Percy. Seven is the most magically powerful number.

Percy is ready to quote Arithmancy at Tom but he stops himself. He hates to admit it but Tom knows more than he, even at sixteen years of age. Tom is capable of producing complex Potions recipes and modifications seemingly from memory—or whatever constitutes a memory store in the diary—as well as discussing even minute details of magical theory. If Tom had reason to believe seven Horcruxes was the most powerful number, Percy would believe it.

Seven, then. The seventh piece being yourself, or a seventh Horcrux?

Myself, I believe.

A soul split seven times makes eight pieces. This is something Percy has been wondering about for quite a while.

Percy feels Tom humming thoughtfully in the recesses of his mind. He shudders slightly but he makes no move to draw away from the diary; this is too important.

I shall continue my research, Tom says finally. ***I believe we need to collect the Horcruxes and assimilate them into one.***

Not destroy them?

The last droplet of ink drips from Percy's quill. The moment it hits the parchment, Percy feels the brutal force of Tom's entry into his mind, as if the other boy gathered his strength and leapt off the page.

Let me be clear, Tom hisses, and it reverberates throughout Percy's entire body. ***If you dare to lay a finger on any of my Horcruxes I will end your life where you stand.***

Percy has no doubt that Tom could enact that promise. He nods furiously. "I promise."

Tom pauses in Percy's mind. ***Swear it.***

Swear what? Percy tries to hide his panic behind his Occlumency shields but is not entirely successful.

Tom laughs delightedly. ***Swear on your magic you will not harm any of my Horcruxes unless I order you to do so.***

Percy tries to think of a way out of making that oath but he cannot do so, not with Tom lounging in his head. He bites his lip and then takes out his wand. “I swear on my magic I will not harm any of the Horcruxes of Tom Riddle unless he orders me to do so,” he says quickly. “So mote it be.”

The second that Tom leaves his head Percy allows himself to collapse in the relief that Tom did not make him swear an Unbreakable Vow, nor one more specific.

He now has two courses of action: convince Tom to order him to harm the Horcruxes, or find an ally who can.

***

December 1993

Professor McGonagall has not said it, but she is beginning to grow impatient. Percy can see it in the lines around her mouth and the pauses she takes before answering his questions that are just a beat too long.

He understands her frustration. He will need to declare his intent to accept her offer of apprenticeship soon to give her time to submit the requisite paperwork and begin planning a course of study.

Percy has no additional information, nothing that leads him to pursue one path over another. Time ticks inexorably down on his last year of Hogwarts and all he can do is stare at her with wide eyes, waiting for something to force his hand.

***

One advantage of the oath Percy swore is that Tom is considerably less reticent. In fact, were he not a Dark Lord in the making, Tom seems almost *excited*.

The problem is, sixteen year old Tom had not decided on what the Horcruxes ought to be. Percy sits through several nights of speculation—Tom, he learns, enjoys the idea of trophies; everything from the Sorting Hat to a family heirloom was, it seems, considered—without either party having any idea of what, precisely, their next target should be.

Surely you had a plan, Percy writes pleadingly one cold December day. He is running out of time. He *has* to destroy the diary at the end of the school year; without Dumbledore’s

omniscient presence, Tom is liable to demand Percy bring him from the diary without delay.

Many plans, Percy, Tom writes back, almost giddily.

Percy exchanges a look with Myrtle, who is reading over his shoulder. He'd finally deigned to let her participate in some of the more *sensitive* sessions he has with Tom, largely out of desperation. That, and Myrtle's endless nagging is enough to wear any man down.

She widens her eyes at him. "Hogwarts," she hisses meaningfully.

Myrtle believes Tom would have hidden one of the Horcruxes in Hogwarts. Percy tends to agree, but he's been hesitating over bringing up that point, fearful that Tom may try and possess him to get to it.

Is there no way to—sense them? Percy writes delicately instead.

Percy's neck prickles as Tom lets out a musing breath. He ignores it with practice; much like Myrtle's chilling movements, Tom's slight susurrations in the air have become routine.

Perhaps, Tom allows. A pause, and then, ***I will need your assistance.***

Percy looks to Myrtle in some alarm. "I'll follow," she says instantly. "I can get help."

"This is folly," Percy hisses, shaking his head.

"This may be our best chance," Myrtle responds with heat, no trace of the wilting, weepy ghost she had been merely six years prior. "Percy, you've barely eight months remaining. We *need* this."

Percy worries his lip. "Go to Snape," he says, firming his grip on his quill. He had thought about this ages ago and decided, reluctantly, that between Snape and McGonagall, he would have better odds of success with Snape. McGonagall, for all her admirable qualities, is second in command to Dumbledore and therefore cannot be trusted. "Only if it is necessary."

Myrtle nods solemnly. Percy takes a second and constructs his Occlumency shields. He pushes downward on the bookshelves in his mind until they fade away into the Restricted Section of his mental library, sealed by the mental equivalent of his blood. Thus prepared, Percy bends over the diary. *There is probably one in Hogwarts, wouldn't you say?*

Let's go get it, then.

All of Tom's entries into Percy's head have been different. Some knock his head back and coax blood from his nose with their force; others feel like sly, creeping fingers massaging the back of his temples. This time, Percy barely notices Tom until he speaks, his smooth voice appearing in the back of Percy's head.

A bathroom, Percy?

Myrtle, thankfully, had the sense to disappear. Percy allows his mind to slide over his relief, not wanting to linger on it in case Tom picks up on the motion.

Privacy is difficult to find in this castle, Percy thinks back.

Tom chuckles appreciatively and then Percy finds himself standing and moving toward the door. This is actually the first time Tom has possessed him and allowed him to retain the memory of it. Percy cannot shake the feeling that his limbs no longer belong to him. He raises his hand just to prove that he can and Tom laughs once again, high and wild.

You are still you, he says, amused.

But I'm also you.

Percy and Tom make their way out of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. If Tom notices that Percy was writing to him near the entrance of the Chamber of Secrets, he makes no comment. Percy can feel Tom's excitement, thrumming around his temples. A hippogriff could have peered around the corner and Tom probably would not have noticed.

Hogwarts, Tom breathes, navigating the corridors with ease. ***How I have missed you.***

Where did you stay when you were not at Hogwarts? Percy dares.

Tom is cheerful enough to answer. ***A dreadful Muggle orphanage,*** he reveals casually, lightly, as if it did not phase him. Percy cannot hide his shock, and Tom laughs again. ***Inauspicious beginnings indeed. We should go and look for it, after this—although I can't imagine I left it still standing.***

Percy files that information away to muse over later. It is too dangerous to let himself think about it now.

I will always love Hogwarts, too, Percy says instead. He focuses and conjures up a memory of the Burrow at its most dishevelled, chickens pecking around the front door, Bill's bedroom leaning precariously from the top of the house, the ghoul moaning dramatically.

Tom barks out a laugh and continues moving, forcing Percy's body to take the stairs two at a time. ***Oh, Percy***, Tom says, almost fondly. ***Is it not a relief to know our beginnings do not need to determine our end?***

Unless you're Muggleborn.

As he'd hoped, Percy's comment elicits a wave of amusement from the other boy. ***I would accept a good Mudblood,*** Tom thinks airily. ***One ready to turn his back on the horrors from whence he came.***

Percy cannot help but question whether that is true. Tom does not comment, so he assumes his host didn't catch the errant thought that slipped out of his shields. Instead, Percy deliberately begins to wonder where they are going. They are heading up, that is for certain. Tom seems to know exactly which stairs to take, predicting their swing and creak before they begin to move. He does not allow Percy to hold onto the bannisters, seeming to exult in the sway of the journey. He nimbly steps over trick stairs as if he made a map of the castle yesterday, rather than sixty years ago.

Tom loves Hogwarts. Percy knew that in the abstract, but now, letting Tom lead him toward his mysterious destination, he understands how deeply that love extends.

So why does he destroy it, not even a decade later?

On the fifth floor, they briefly run into Draco, stepping out of the Arithmancy classroom. The younger boy's eyes brighten when he sees Percy, and Tom slows. Abraxas flits through their shared mind.

"Hullo, Percy," Draco greets him, quite jovially for the Malfoy heir.

Percy feels Tom urging him, and so he finds he can open his mouth and respond. "Good afternoon, Draco. I take it you are enjoying Arithmancy?"

"It's *brilliant*," Draco breathes. He brandishes an exam parchment triumphantly, having clearly just received it. Percy takes it; as expected, a large *O* adorns the top.

Abraxas loved Arithmancy, too, Tom says, almost fondly. ***I did not know you were friends with his grandson, Percy***.

"Congratulations," Percy says, instead of responding to Tom. Hermione pushes past, her chin wobbling, exam paper clutched tightly in her fist.

"It's fine, Granger," Draco calls after her gleefully. "An *Exceeds Expectations* for a Mudblood is basically an *Outstanding*."

Tom snorts inside Percy's head. Hermione whirls on Draco. "Get stuffed, Malfoy!"

Percy raises his eyebrows at Draco, who shrugs cheerfully. "I thought it would make her feel better," he says innocently.

Tom snorts again. Hermione sniffs loudly and opens her bag, stuffing her exam inside. A glint of gold catches Percy's eye as she leans forward, struggling with the buckle on her bag, which is predictably stuffed to the brim.

Percy very carefully does not wonder as to what that glint of gold is. He very deliberately does not allow himself to realise that Hermione Granger has a Time Turner. In fact, to distract both he and Tom from Hermione, he turns back to Draco. "Don't use that kind of language," Percy says, hoping to, in some way, make Hermione feel better.

Draco sweeps a bow. His good mood over his Arithmancy exam is clearly too strong to be dulled, even by Percy's admonishment. "Not where someone can hear," he agrees. "Granger, let me know if you'd like me to tutor you, will you? I've heard somewhere that even half-kneazles can learn new tricks."

This one has Abraxas written all over him, Tom thinks delightedly. ***We must recruit him, Percy***.

He's thirteen, Percy points out. *Anyway, I doubt this was our target destination.*

They leave Draco and Hermione to what looks to be a towering row in the corridor and continue their dizzying ascent up two more flights of stairs. It is only when they are standing in front of a tapestry of dancing trolls that Percy begins to be concerned.

He hopes Myrtle is next to them, floating silently.

I present to you—the Room of All, Tom says grandly. He presses Percy's hand against the stone and intones, "Allow us entrance into your treasures."

Somehow, this wills a door into being. Percy blinks in surprise. He supposes it should not be a surprise that the Room of Hidden Things has more than one entrance, or more than one name. Mimsy is the one who told him he had to walk back and forth thrice to request entrance. He'd never doubted her nor tried to will a door into being.

That was the difference between him and Tom, Percy supposes, as they open the door and enter into the same Room of Hidden Things to which Percy is accustomed.

The Room is organised into sixteen neat quadrants. Percy waits nervously as Tom takes in the glowing tagging system, the magical lines on the floor indicating each quadrant.

Dumbledore?

Me, actually, Percy admits. *I call this the Room of Hidden Things.*

Impressive, Tom comments wryly. He walks them over to the nearest quadrant and picks up an old Quidditch glove, neatly labelled. ***You really are a swot.***

I thought this maximised my chances of finding something useful, Percy says honestly. His mind is buzzing: he had passed one of Tom's Horcruxes and not noticed? He may have even handled it, tagged it as low risk.

The thought has barely left his mind when another, far more worrying, realisation creeps in: they are in the same room as the diadem.

Tom cannot be allowed to find the diadem, but how can Percy stop him?

He tries to tamper his anxiety as Tom meanders through Percy's carefully constructed system, occasionally chuckling over some of the items found or some of Percy's classifications. ***I see all of the money has been taken,*** Tom comments when he upends a nice money pouch and nothing clatters to the floor.

I am nothing if not opportunistic, Percy responds. *Also, poor. What are we looking for, Tom?*

I am looking for myself, Tom says. He rifles through Percy's bookbag until he finds the diary and grips it tightly. ***This may hurt.***

Percy has one more second to hope Myrtle has followed them before Tom speaks a ringing Latin incantation and Percy feels every fibre of his being leap into flames.

He *feels* the diary, acutely, as if it is a part of his own soul—and he realises, suddenly, what it feels like for Tom, to feel both human and not, to be trapped inside these pages. He sees a glimpse of the Slytherin common room, sees Tom pacing around it alone, and realises that Tom inscribed Hogwarts into these pages. That is how Tom knows it so well; deep within the recesses of the diary Tom has existed in his memories alone for sixty years.

No wonder he had been so eager to talk to Percy, so delighted to walk around the real thing.

Percy is just beginning to get a handle on the pain when it flares suddenly and he cries out. The most immense longing fills him until he falls to his knees, tears leaking out of him, a wounded cry torn from his mouth.

He is split, and it hurts as if someone took a knife and ripped him in half. For a second, he reaches out with his awareness, and he *feels* his magic, and Tom's, and his soul, and Tom's, and he feels them all vibrating against each other with increased urgency, and he sobs as he is torn apart by dozens of sharp fingers, and he hears Tom's strangled cry echo in his chest.

But, hope lingers just out of his darkening sphere of existence. He feels himself, feels Tom, feels the wild and exultant relief that part of him is *still there*, just out of reach.

"It's here," Tom says, and Percy feels his—their—mouth move weakly. "It's here."

Percy lifts a trembling hand and points directly to their left. "It's there."

It is as if they are blinded except for a single, pulsing flare of light. Through the needles pricking their skin and the feeling of blood coating their body, Percy and Tom stand and stumble toward that which calls them.

It is the diadem. Somehow, Percy is not surprised, though Tom certainly is. Percy feels their mind whirring, as Tom tries to confront the fact that he turned one of Hogwarts' greatest treasures into a vessel for his soul, that they may have to destroy it to bring him back to life.

They reach for it. When their hands touch the twisted, gleaming metal, a great column of mist twists out of the cold blue jewels and solidifies into Dumbledore, beard not quite auburn, glasses perched on his crooked nose. The twinkle in his eyes is blinding, and Percy feels their eyes water from the strain as Tom forces them to hold their head high.

"A disappointment," Dumbledore whispers harshly, looking at Percy-Tom as if they are merely dirt solidified into being.

Percy feels Tom's pulse of rage meld with his own, feels their hand rising, their wand pointed at Dumbledore's heart.

"Not...real," Percy whispers with the last vestiges of his strength.

Tom cannot hear him. His anger has consumed Percy's, and Percy feels the freezing-hot burn of Tom's hatred swell inside of him. "I am more than you will ever be," Tom shouts, and Percy feels himself say it alongside Tom, unwilling and yet, in some way he cannot verbalise,

exultant. His mind is buzzing, his magic sparking and warring with Tom's, whose magic slides and skates icily over Percy's skin.

Dumbledore laughs mockingly. "You could not even last seventy years, my boy," he says patronisingly. "You would have assumed more power had you not let your infantile plans guide you to destruction. An infant, Tom. That was all that was needed to destroy you."

"I will return," they say, and their voice is cold and determined. "And you will be the first I kill."

Dumbledore looks away, as if they are not even worth his attention. "I know of magic you could only dream of, dear boy, but then again, you have always been arrogant, ever since you were a small boy bullying your peers."

Something about this interaction is important. Percy tries to focus, but the pounding in his head is too loud, and he feels himself slipping sideways into unconsciousness. His magic slides and crests over Tom's, and Tom's twists and strangles his, and he feels his throat closing in panic.

"Leave us alone," Percy spits out, willing himself to stay awake.

Dumbledore looks at Percy with pity. "You are nothing, Percy Weasley," he says with kindness. It burns even more for it. "Even Tom only uses you because you are convenient. You are just a footnote in this story, Percy. When it is all settled, nobody will know the part you played in it."

Percy freezes. Could it be that this Horcrux version of Dumbledore knows, somehow, what he is planning? Does Tom?

But no, he finds their mouth forming the words as Tom protests, swearing at Dumbledore. He feels their hand tighten around their wand, feels their magic build inside of them, feels the heat of Fiendfyre sear the soles of their feet. He drags his gaze up to see the searing gaze of the fiery basilisk as it rears its terrible head.

"Not...the diadem," Percy gasps, his chest tightening against his vow. He cannot resist—he must resist—Tom is angry, so angry, that it nearly drowns Percy—he feels their magic swelling up inside, dark and furious and consuming, and he draws in his breath and holds it, as if he could deprive the basilisk of air.

The basilisk turns and hisses at Percy and lunges at Dumbledore. "Tom, *please,*" begs Percy, and Tom laughs, the sound high and cruel and wild, echoing in the space between where Tom and Percy live together in their head. The basilisk roars and turns its great, terrible head to Percy. He wrenches their hand down under the blistering gaze of the basilisk and they fall together into darkness.

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He awakens, and he is alone.

The Room is full of snow.

He is flat on his back and he stares up in confusion at the light flakes whirling and dancing from the ceiling. They twist their way toward him, and when they fall on his open mouth, he struggles to lick his lips.

Ashes.

Percy allows himself one full minute of despair, of anger, of sadness, of exhaustion before he forces himself to sit up.

The entire Room is in ashes. Everything that Percy spent the last two years organising is gone, reduced to a charred, melting version of their former glory. The air is thick with ash and haze, and the ground is still warm.

As Percy stares around him in horror, he realises three things have been left intact.

The first is Percy's wand. It lays beside him, and though it is a bit singed at the top, when he picks it up, a spark falls from the tip.

The second is the diary. Percy picks it up and it is warm to the touch but not destroyed. Percy manages to find his bag and digs for a quill, but all he has the energy to do is to write, *Hello?*

No response.

Tom may be injured—or destroyed. Percy does not want to think about it. He does not know which he hopes for more. Instead, he stoops to pick up the last item that has escaped harm: the diadem.

In contrast to the diary, the diadem is bitterly cold. He picks it up and winces in anticipation, but no smoke spills from the jewels.

"I believe the Horcrux may not be gone," says a voice. Percy turns slowly, feeling as though it is a dream. It is the Grey Lady, and her eyes are full of ghostly tears, shining diamonds that drip slowly down her face and fizzle out before they hit the floor.

"Is He gone?"

The Grey Lady does not spare a glance for the diary. She swoops down and extends a trembling hand, but it passes through the diadem. "He tried to destroy his own soul," she says in wonder.

"Why is it unharmed?"

The Grey Lady meets Percy's eyes, and something like a smile appears on her translucent features. "My mother knew more spells than He ever will," she says, and Percy nods slowly.

Nothing feels real to him right now. He feels his head swim and he rubs his eyes behind his glasses desperately.

“Is it over?” Percy asks, and he does not even know what he is asking. The possession? His task? His secret?

The Grey Lady surveys him. “If you can destroy the Horcrux, I will owe you for your deed,” she says formally. “You will have my protection, as long as I can provide it.”

These words slide over Percy and drop to the floor. “Is it over?” He asks again, furrowing his brow.

The Grey Lady leans forward. “Are you feeling unwell?”

He stares at her and then he crumples, and once again, his vision fades to black.

***

When he awakens, this time, he is facing one Severus Snape.

He almost wishes he had not woken.

Chapter End Notes

Better think quick, Percy.

REVELATIONS (3/4)

Chapter Notes

> Eek, I hope you all like this chapter. Please let me know your thoughts -- I don't love how this one turned out, it's been sitting in my drafts for a few days and then I decided to just post it. Much like Percy, I can't avoid it forever.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER SEVEN: REVELATIONS (3/4)

1993 — 1994 (Percy is 17 & 30, Harry is 13, Ginny is 12, Tom is still 16, and Sirius Black and Severus Snape are 33)

“You will likely be expelled for this, you know,” is Snape’s first comment once Percy opens his eyes.

They are, strangely, still in the Room of Requirement. Percy is still on the floor. Everything is as it was except that the Grey Lady is gone and somehow Snape has appeared. From Percy’s vantage point, crumpled and aching on the ground, he has a hazy sense that Snape himself is a ghost, his dark hair dusted with white ash, and his face a grey, unhealthy pallor. Perhaps Percy is the one that is dead, though if he *died* and missed the point of decision that Myrtle and Anthony spoke so reverently about, he will be exceedingly upset.

You’re not dead, he tells himself, trying to reel in his careening thoughts. He blinks, absently registering that his glasses are smudged but not broken, and tries to take a steadying breath to force his body to focus on the problem at hand. Severus Snape. Tom. The *diadem.*

“I can explain,” Percy says automatically, pushing himself to sit up. He feels slightly better, though his head is still swimming. The room has cooled considerably; most of the ashes have settled, so the air no longer looks filled with delicate snow.

“You will have to,” Snape says, raising an eyebrow. Percy feels unsettled by the calm, conversational tone that Snape is using with him; it feels almost more dangerous than outright outrage, as if the conclusion to Snape’s ire has already been decided, and he and Percy are strolling toward that destination without any hope of diverting their path.

“Does Dumbledore know?”

Snape peers at Percy closely. “An interesting question,” he says non-committedly. “Your girlfriend seemed to have the same concern.”

Penny? For a second, Percy doubts himself, his two lives swimming before his eyes. He stretches out a hand and flexes his fingers, as if to ensure they are still connected to his body. ***You are still you***, he remembers Tom saying. He fights down an explosion of panic and reaches out hesitantly with his magic, but he cannot feel any sign of Tom in his head or in his body.

"The ghost," Snape says, rolling his eyes at Percy's befuddled expression. "She came to me, begged me not to tell a soul."

Good old Myrtle. Percy feels a tremendous explosion of goodwill for his friend and it strengthens him enough to get painfully to his feet. Snape has not yet hexed him into oblivion, so presumably he has a chance of talking his way out of this. "Where is she now?"

"Guarding the door. Sit, won't you?" Snape says, conjuring two chairs.

Percy sits gingerly on one. A second later, he is bound tightly to the chair by ropes that snaked out of Snape's wand without even the courtesy of a verbal spell as warning.

Well, Percy supposes he should have expected that. He shifts uncomfortably under the binds and tries to force his mind to pay attention. Many years ago, Percy made contingency plans for coming clean to various people in his life he could not simply Obliviate—his parents, each of his siblings, his Professors. He had written out detailed speeches, aiming to create a series of narratives that would be compelling to each person.

He cannot recall the one he'd planned for Snape, but he tries not to panic. Percy has grown practised at the art of dissembling, and Snape has no reason to think anything other of Percy than that he is a precocious, ambitious, and slightly foolish seventh year student.

Snape holds up a small black diary. "Let's start your explanation with this, shall we?"

Percy blinks rapidly. The probability of revealing the truth inches a few notches higher. What had he decided to use with Snape? Sheer honesty, if he can remember correctly. He has the advantage, in that he knows that Snape is against the Dark Lord, and he knows why.

Percy could try to lie—but there is no lie that he can think of that will prevent Snape from going to Dumbledore with the knowledge that Percy Weasley is writing to Tom Riddle. The best he can do is try and say only half of the truth. "I am trying to defeat the Dark Lord," he says, and waits for a reaction.

He does not wait long, but he is disappointed. Snape raises an incredulous eyebrow but otherwise does not react like Percy had expected, with explosions or anger, as if he were not surprised to hear Percy say such an outrageous thing. "Do tell."

"The Dark Lord created Horcruxes," Percy says honestly. Snape's eyebrow inches higher. "I thought I could convince Tom to tell me what they were."

"And you discovered this before or after he used you to set a basilisk on your sister?"

Percy flinches. "After," he lies.

Snape regards him silently for a long second and then reaches inside his pocket for a small, crystal bottle with a colourless liquid. “Tell me, Mr. Weasley, do you believe yourself capable of lying under Veritaserum?”

“Of course not, Professor,” Percy says at once. “But I would tell you the truth without the potion, and I would point out that it *is* rather unethical to dose a student with a restricted substance, sir, but I know you already must be aware of that.”

Snape flicks his gaze deliberately around the wreckage of the room, as if to convey that they have already moved beyond the bounds of ethicality, and then steps closer to Percy, uncorking the bottle. “Tongue out, Weasley. If you will not cooperate, I have no qualms ensuring your compliance.”

As the drops hit his tongue, colourless and odourless but nevertheless searing, Percy’s first instinct is to panic. His second is to laugh. Weakly, at first, and then gathering momentum, the stress of the last few months—years—bleeding into the wild edge of his chuckles. Assuming that the potion is real—and the way that his tongue begins to feel heavy in his mouth suggests that it is—then Percy is going to tell the truth.

Percy has thought about Veritaserum before. There is an extremely low probability that he will be able to answer the questions truthfully without revealing his secret.

To his extreme embarrassment, his laughter turns into tears, dripping wetly down his face. He avoids looking at Snape, who is likely contemplating what Dark spell to use to disembowel Percy for his disgusting display of weakness and emotion. How can he explain to Snape why he is crying? Exhaustion, fear, anxiety? Relief? He's been toying with the idea of telling Snape for years, and finally Snape has forced his hand.

"Spare me your adolescent attempts at manipulation," Snape says, irritation edging into the bark of his voice.

Percy shakes his head and gets himself under control. "I'll tell you everything," he gasps, and the sheer relief he feels at saying those words threatens to set him off again. "But you have to promise me you won't take action until you've heard the whole story."

Snape looks at him dismissively. "I am not one for hasty action, otherwise I would have killed you already."

This brings Percy up short. He swallows and tries to refocus. He's become used to thinking of Snape as his slightly sardonic professor, someone who is in many ways an ally. If pressed, he would even say that Snape likes him, or at the least tolerates him. But Snape has no reason to trust Percy. he has no reason to think of him as anything other than a seventeen year boy caught up with the Dark Lord.

In for a Knut, in for a Galleon, Percy thinks, not for the first time that year.

(Percy is a Gryffindor, after all. It takes bravery to stand up to one's family; it takes courage to believe one's own convictions. It takes strength to admit to a fault, to return to those you've

wronged, to display contrition. Percy has always done the hard thing, even if those choices seemed easy from afar).

"Look at my memories," he says, meeting Snape's eyes. "I won't fight you."

If he is to partner with Snape, Snape needs to be on his side without question. Snape cannot betray him to Dumbledore or work against him. Percy had concluded that long ago, which was one reason he had hesitated to come clean to Snape thus far. He could not give Snape a half truth, a partial lie.

Snape raises a sardonic eyebrow. "If you try to lie to me, I will kill you and make it look like an accident," he says conversationally, and it sounds so much like Tom that Percy abruptly is reminded that Snape spent years working with the Dark Lord. He swallows hard but does not back away.

"If I try to lie to you at this point, I probably deserve it," Percy says, and tips his head up.

He has a split second to review his chronology before the man breathes "*Legilimens*" and they are sucked jointly into the whirl of Percy's memories.

***

Legilimency has, for Percy, been a completely theoretical exercise thus far, save his one fairly unsuccessful attempt at entering Borgin's mind. His only study partner is Myrtle, and she can hardly cast a spell on him to read his mind. He had thought it might be like his nightly Occlumency exercises, wherein he reviews the memories of the day and neatly parcels them into the bookshelves that represent his mind.

Instead, it is like his few brief attempts at Quidditch: wild, uncontrollable, and distinctly nauseating.

Snape, predictably, follows Tom Riddle. He narrows in unerringly at Percy's first engagement with the diary, and they jointly relive Percy's hesitant, nervous exhilaration, the sense of adrenaline that fills him when he sees Tom's smooth writing.

The memories flip by like pages of the diary: Percy, hunched over the book before bed, ink staining his pillowcases; Tom, pulling him into his memory, the sepia-toned colours of the memory-within-a-memory; Percy's look of blank confusion as he stands before a beast of a basilisk, mouthing words that are not his own.

Stop, Percy pleads when the sight of the basilisk swaying its horned head is enough to pause Snape's rampage of his mind. *Please, let me show you.*

He feels Snape's burgeoning anger. With a gasp, Percy wrenches his mind from the other man's grasp.

Snape towers over him. “You dare,” he hisses, his face ugly with his rage. “You dare try to lie to me. Typical Gryffindor arrogance. You think you are the first from your House to be swayed by the Dark Lord? I have seen men braver than you reduced to ash at his feet, and you dare to think he will view you as an equal, as his *right hand man*?”

Percy flinches at these words spit out through clenched teeth. Snape has the completely wrong idea, he realises with dawning horror. “No, sir, please—please, let me explain—”

“I have allowed myself to be fooled by you,” Snape continues, cutting off Percy’s feeble protests. “Let that thought bring you comfort before your death, child. I admit I allowed your pathetic forays into Dark Magic to be unchecked; I thought your adolescent desire for power could be redirected into an area of substance; I permitted you to continue this foolishness, content to observe from afar. I watched you stumble toward a cliff you would not be able to climb should you fall, and I tried to push you away from it.”

He stops, abruptly, but Percy cannot break the silence, frozen as he is in his seat by the sight of Snape wearing his anger as both shield and sword.

“*But no longer*,” Snape whispers, and the quiet is more jarring than his shouts. “You are no more than the rest of them, Percival Weasley. Arrogant, brash, idiotic. The Dark Lord has no use for you and neither do I.”

Percy flinches again, realising only now how much Snape’s esteem has come to mean to him, how cutting it is to hear this dismissal. He gathers up the remnants of his courage and tries once again to meet Snape’s eyes, though his own eyes fill with those same perfidious tears. “Please,” he whispers again, holding fast to the conviction that he can just *show* Snape the truth, the other man will listen. “Let me show you.”

Snape eyes him for a prolonged second and then barks a laugh of mirthless amusement. “You never learn,” he comments, as if disappointed. “Very well. Whisper your inane secrets into my ears, Weasley. Make them good; they may be your last words before your death. Whether you die by my hand or by the Dementors in Azkaban—rest assured, you will no longer do harm.”

Percy inhales sharply and nods. “Let me show you,” he repeats. “The whole thing. Please, Professor. Do not interrupt until the end.”

“You presume—” Snape begins, outraged.

“*Please,*” Percy breaks in, and perhaps the conviction in his voice makes up for the tears still trailing softly down his cheeks, for Snape allows himself to be interrupted. He gives a single, terse nod, whispers the spell, and they are once again in Percy’s mind, staring at a basilisk.

Percy lets the memory play out while he gathers his mental strength. He cannot remember where he planned to begin, so he goes with his instinct. He is a logical, ordered person; he begins at the beginning, as one does. First steps first, and then the second.

Percy, eleven, Sorted into Gryffindor.

Snape's derision echoes inside Percy's head, but he stays true to his earlier promise and does not interrupt the flow of memories.

Percy excelling, though more at lessons than at raw, unadulterated magic. He takes tutelage in Charms and Transfiguration and Herbology but not Potions. In fact, he privately does not think very much of Professor Snape; a professor ought to be able to adapt to a wide range of learning styles, rather than aiming merely to rule the classroom with an iron first.

(Somewhere in his head, Snape snorts as this thought solidifies).

His family mocks him; oh, how he resents their mockery, their refusal to celebrate his academic achievements. Fred is the worst, always taking the mickey, 'Perfect Percy the Ponce' echoing in his mind. Bill, always better than him, and Charlie, the rebel. His roommates tolerate him but they do not like him; he is so lonely. (A feeling that it is not fair that he alone is so lonely, that he alone feels sick to his stomach with the obligations that he feels were thrust upon him).

But with his fifth year comes a Prefect's badge, and Harry Potter.

(He feels Snape's attention sharpen as the differences in the timeline begin to become clear).

Harry is at first merely a first year, albeit a famous one. Percy strives to be a good example for him and for Ron, too. He's disappointed when Harry appears to be a rulebreaker, though a bloody good Seeker. Ron seems destined to go the same way as Fred and George, getting detentions for some nonsense involving a dragon, losing needless House points, even battling a troll.

And then the end of the year occurs, and Percy is sitting in the Hospital Wing with Fred and George and their parents, hearing Professor Dumbledore gravely explain that Ron was injured while preventing Professor Quirrell, possessed by a Dark Wizard, from stealing the Philosopher's Stone.

His disbelief, his incredulity. (His jealousy, Ron winning fifty House Points in a public display, points awarded by the Headmaster himself).

(Snape is cautiously confused. Percy can feel the other man thinking, putting the pieces together slowly).

His sixth year. There is his blossoming relationship with Penny, of course, but suddenly the Chamber of Secrets has been opened. Penny is frightened. They have many fights about what the best course of action ought to be; Percy passionately argues that Dumbledore needs to alert the Ministry, bring in the Aurors, and allow the government to restore law and order to the school. Penny believes otherwise, trusting in Dumbledore to have their best interests at heart.

Penny, Petrified. Hermione, Petrified. Harry Potter is a Parselmouth. And perhaps he does not really believe the rumors that Harry is the Heir of Slytherin—for starters, he's twelve—Percy is not stupid. Harry is involved somehow, whether willingly or unwillingly, and where Harry's involved, so is Ron.

‘ Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever.’

(Snape gives a start, but Percy does not let it phase him. They continue down the horrid events of that night, his fear and his guilt, culminating with the bizarre claims that Harry Potter has slain a basilisk).

Dumbledore did not protect Penny. He did not protect Ginny. He did not protect Hermione, or Colin, or Justin. Professor Snape is the only one that does anything of use at all (smug satisfaction, even amidst these revelations). *The next year, Percy is Head Boy and he will use his power to protect the students when he can.*

Sirius Black, escaped from Azkaban. (Percy winces at the sharp burst of anger that spills from Snape's joined mind).

Dumbledore chose him for Head Boy. Percy goes on extra patrols, begins learning about warding in his free time, reads about Sirius Black. The Ministry sends Dementors, and though they cause a chill in Percy’s chest every time they float by, he pulls his robes around him tighter and hurries on. They are for his own protection.

Once again, Ron is involved in some sort of mischief. Sirius Black tries to attack him in his bed, perhaps mistaking him for Harry. Percy wars with himself all year, but Ron is attacked, again, by Sirius Black. Professor Lupin is a werewolf. It is rather apparent that Dumbledore will do nothing to protect Ron, not if it interferes with whatever game he is playing with Harry.

(Many emotions leaking to Percy from Snape: anger, hatred, resentment, shock. Something that may be *understanding*).

Percy joins the Ministry. A junior position, but one he applies for and receives without anyone in his family helping him. His father is crushed that he chooses cauldron regulation instead of Misuse of Muggle Registration, but Percy has no interest in working with his father. He is going to make something out of himself. His name will carry its own weight.

A breakthrough: Percy is chosen to assist Crouch at the Triwizard Tournament. It is a massive honour, and Percy finds it increasingly easier to quell the brief spasm of irritation that erupts every time Crouch mis-remembers his name. Especially after the whole nonsense at the Quidditch World Cup— (Percy feels Snape’s alert attention at the Dark Mark, floating in the sky)*— the Ministry must present a strong, united front. Clearly some fringe enthusiasts are trying to disrupt the peace, but Percy will do his part to not let that happen.*

Harry bloody Potter is chosen for the Triwizard Tournament. At least Ron seems to come to his senses, realising that Harry creates drama, that he makes unsafe and unwise decisions. Percy has his hands full with the Tournament, but he makes time to observe Ron and Harry whenever he is at Hogwarts, and he sees how moody and unpredictable Harry is, how much Ron values his attention. It isn’t an equal relationship.

Cedric Diggory dies in a freak accident. Harry is distraught, claiming the death to be at the hands of He Who Must Not Be Named. Of course he does; Harry is traumatised. He’s alone in the world, really. Even if he is not intending to bring everything back to his past, he seems

unable to move past You Know Who, to realise that he is not living in some sort of adventure novel with his name emblazoned on the cover. In the real world, there are more bogeymen than just one dark lord.

(Snape seems ready to interrupt, so Percy moves on quickly).

Snape, thrusting his arm forward, the Dark Mark clear. The Minister, incredulous. Percy takes another look at his family crowding around Harry's bedside and hurries after Fudge. His family will have to see, now. Of course they care for Harry, and he is just a boy, not even fifteen. But clearly there is danger afoot, and Harry is not safe to be around. Dumbledore clearly has Harry under his protection; he will be fine, but can the same be said for Percy's family?

Harry is unstable. Dementors, in Little Whinging? Preposterous. Dumbledore defends him, of course, as he would defend no other student. A Squib's testimony is sufficient to clear Harry from all charges. Even if there were Dementors in Little Whinging, what about the clear pattern of instability and recklessness that characterised the last four years? Harry is a danger to Hogwarts.

Percy will admit he does not particularly like Dolores Umbridge, but at least she values order and structure. Reports from Hogwarts seem encouraging, though Harry is making a fool of himself, shouting about You Know Who without providing any real evidence. If Harry is serious about this, there are procedures to follow, ways to proceed legally. He does not even bother to interview with the Aurors nor submit written testimony. Percy can only conclude that he does not have any proof and is merely trying to stir up controversy, though for what end he is not sure. He counsels Ron to stay away, to distance himself while Harry is going through this difficult time, but Ron is blinded by adolescent furor.

And then, the day that changed everything. Sirius Black, dead. You Know Who, in the Ministry.

A dawning realisation: Harry had been <u>right</u>.

But Scrimgeour is the new Minister, and he is fierce and reasonable in a way that Fudge never was. Percy feels comfortable working for him, trusting him to do what needs to be done to confront this new threat. His father tells him about the Order, and he has to laugh in their faces. Trust Dumbledore, when he cannot even be trusted to protect the school? Scrimgeour is a stronger man than Dumbledore will ever be. It's clear that Dumbledore has his own agenda, and Percy wants no part of it.

Dumbledore, killed by Severus Snape.

Snape's shock at this is enough to break them both out of the memories and back to reality. Percy is breathing hard, sweat collecting under his armpits. Snape does not look any better off, his pale face glistening with exertion.

"What is the meaning of this?" Snape demands, looming over Percy. "The audacity—to *dare* suggest that I would ever murder Albus, I should kill you where you stand—"

“You’ve guessed the truth, Professor,” Percy interrupts, his head throbbing. “I felt it. I know you know the truth, you just don’t want to admit it.”

“These memories are fake,” Snape says darkly. “I don’t know what Dark Magic you’ve done to create these, but it’s clear you’ve been planning this for a long time—”

Percy’s shout echoes throughout the Room, all the more cavernous for its store of ash instead of objects. “I’m a time traveller.”

Snape stops abruptly.

“I’m a time traveller,” Percy repeats, a little more softly. “I know that you know this. I felt you realise it. We’re almost done, Professor.”

Snape’s lips curl. “A time traveller,” he repeats scathingly.

“I know that you are in the Order,” Percy says. “You loved Lily Evans. You were Dumbledore’s man for much of the last war and all of this one.”

The force of Snape’s entry into his mind slams his head back into the chair. Snape rips through the next set of memories, watching as the Ministry falls, as You Know Who takes over, as Snape is appointed Headmaster of Hogwarts. He does not linger on Percy’s feelings of guilt or his agonising over whether to admit to his family that he was wrong or continue where he is. He does not hesitate when Percy is appointed as a scribe for the Muggleborn Trials, nor when Percy hears that Ron has broken into Gringotts. He blazes past Fred’s death without a blink.

He stops only when Harry Potter catches the Dark Lord’s wand and watches him keel over into the dust.

They watch the memory together silently.

Sensing Snape’s shock, Percy takes control gently. He shows Snape his guilt over Fred’s death, the way that it eats at him for the next year. He reveals his conversation with Harry. *Horcruxes*. To split a soul? His resolve: he will do it again and make it right. He will end the Dark Lord before he can touch a single member of Percy’s family. He will make it up to Fred, to Ron, to Harry.

Percy does not show Snape much of the second timeline, focusing only on his decision to write to Tom in an attempt to find the other Horcruxes. He shows the Chamber from his perspective, his resolve: he will find the Horcruxes and he will protect his siblings. He skirts over the diadem and ends with the memory of himself waking up in the Room, Snape overhead.

And then, slowly, he expels Snape from his mind and waits for whatever comes next.

***

Snape stares at him for a very long time.

Percy is used to his long silences, but this one is nearly longer than he can endure. He shifts, uncomfortable in the cold embrace of thick and heavy ropes.

Despite what his brothers may think, Percy does not enjoy reviewing his performance on tests after the fact. Interviews, exams, public speaking; he will prepare for them as much as possible, perform them as calmly and competently as he can, and then, immediately upon their termination, sink into the sweet relief that accompanies finishing an anxiety-inducing task. Percy is not one for organised religion, but he imagines that if believing in a creator provides anything close to the limp bonelessness of knowing what's done is done, and the result is out of one's hands, well, he can see the appeal.

Thus he allows himself to lean back into the exaltation of having finally shared his burden and allows his eyes to roam the Room while Snape thinks. He sees the diadem to his left, hidden slightly under his bookbag; the Grey Lady, he postulates, exerting what little influence she can over the physical world. He begins breathing slowly and calmly, forcing his racing heart to settle. The trick to calmly awaiting results is to have faith in one's ability to meet the next curve in the road. If he prepares for tests and maintains a good average in a class, performing poorly on one exam is a setback merely than a failure. If he does not lie during an interview, actually being expected to complete a job is a challenge to conquer, rather than dread. Percy does not know exactly how Snape will react, but he is secure in his knowledge that he has told the truth and not left additional traps to fall into later.

Then, Snape levels his wand directly at Percy's heart.

Percy tenses instantly.

"I may have to kill you," Snape says, and if Percy is not mistaken, his tone contains a hint of regret. "I trust you will understand why."

"I very much do not understand why," protests Percy.

Snape looks at him evenly. "I have seen your memories; I know what the future holds. You know who I am, or you know something of it. Do you really believe that I would risk seeing His defeat merely to save my own life?"

Percy opens his mouth and then shuts it again. Yes, he can see the logic in what Snape proposes. Except, "Killing me would definitely change the timeline."

"I believe part of your motivation for returning is that you are not instrumental in His death," Snape says, rather insightfully. Percy scowls. "I cannot risk that your artless machinations will tilt the balance away from victory."

Percy actually contemplates this, but he eventually shakes his head. "We can destroy the Horcruxes, Professor. We can end him before anyone has to die."

"I can destroy the Horcruxes," Snape corrects. "I hardly need the assistance of a seventeen year old boy.” A pause, in which Percy snorts, insulted despite himself. Then, “However, you are correct. Your death may impact the timeline unduly. There are other ways to render you immobile."

Percy knows instantly what he means. "I won't tell you what I've hidden," he says instantly. "You'll have to rip it out of my mind. Notes I've saved, plans I've set into motion. If you Obliviate me I will eventually find something."

"I could make you talk," Snape says, and the dark edge to his tone sends shivers down Percy's spine. A second later, Snape’s voice is thoughtful. "But perhaps there is an advantage to your aid."

"I would hope you would be aiding *me*," Percy insists, affronted, hoping the Veritaserum will make his voice ring with truth.

Snape rolls his eyes. "You could not survive one battle with the Dark Lord; what makes you think you could navigate an entire war?"

Percy gathers all of his strength and focuses his wandless magic on his binds. With a sizzle, they fall away. He enjoys the look of surprise on Snape's face but knows he can never bank on Snape failing to ward his ropes against wandless magic again. "Partners, then. I am not very much younger than you, Professor—Severus, no matter how I may seem in this body. Believe it or not, I’m thirty years old."

He tries to convey this maturity to Snape as he stands, hoping against reason he did not show the flutter of discomfort when he dared say *Severus*.

"One wonders whether repeating adolescence ought to count in the tally," Snape comments dryly, but he lowers his wand.

Percy grins, relief flooding his body. "It certainly is not fun."

Partners, then.

Stranger things have happened.

“You cannot—" Percy chokes on the words, the potion refusing to allow him to say what he'd planned. "I do not want you to tell Dumbledore.”

“Yes,” Snape agrees, simply. Percy blinks, having expected more of a fight, and Snape raises an eyebrow. “Albus would never be capable of the patience required to leave the timeline intact. The ghost knows?”

Percy nods. “And you can’t Obliviate her, or kill her.”

“Indeed, though there are ways to send ghosts to their demise,” Snape says darkly. He continues to look at Percy. “Why were you here, tonight?”

Percy points to the diary and then, after a prolonged second, nudges the diadem out from under his bookbag. Snape inhales sharply, and Percy hurries to explain. “It is another Horcrux. Tom—he sensed it, possessed me. I think he tried to destroy it—I don’t know if he succeeded. The last thing I remember is Fiendfyre.”

Snape reaches into his robes for his dragonhide gloves and then lifts the diadem gingerly. He examines it visually from all angles, his eyes wide. “Remarkable,” he breathes. “You knew it was the diadem?”

“The Grey Lady tasked me to find it,” Percy says truthfully. “I did not know it was a Horcrux. I never would have—I couldn’t have imagined—”

“Yes, the thought of perverting such an artefact is unthinkable,” Snape muses, continuing to examine the diadem. “You believed it would bring you wisdom?”

Percy flushes. “The Grey Lady tasked me to find it,” he repeats again weakly. The Veritaserum hums around his tongue but does not force him to answer the question.

Snape looks up from the diadem to give him a derisive look. “Indeed,” he says before secreting the diadem away in one of his many pockets. “We shall have to examine it further. I am not too familiar with Horcruxes, or how to detect one. The diary, I assume?”

Percy nods slowly, unable to entirely prevent his instinctive reach for it. He feels a personal kinship to it, particularly after his experience with Tom’s possession, feeling as though his self merged with Tom’s broken soul. “I do not know if this has been destroyed, either. Tom may be—exhausted.”

Snape peers at him closely. “You hope he is not destroyed.”

“If he is destroyed, our hopes for finding the rest of the Horcruxes are destroyed with him,” Percy deflects, irritated that he is so transparent. He does not know what he hopes for, but he can admit that part of him wants Tom to spring back under his quill so that they may continue plotting together.

“He told you nothing else?”

“Well, he said there were six,” Percy recounts unwillingly. “To make seven splits of the soul. He was not sure what the others would be, merely that they would be important to him.”

“Other Founders’ Artefacts, perhaps?”

Percy opens his mouth to tell of his research into Hufflepuff’s cup or Slytherin’s various amulets and then hesitates. He still has not abandoned the idea of using them as aid, and how unlikely is it that Tom would have found and corrupted more than one sacred artefact? The Sorting Hat must be pristine, otherwise someone would have discovered it by now. He likely only used the diadem because it was accessible.

“Perhaps,” Percy hedges instead. Truthful, truthful, truthful. He is nothing but truthful. “He was descended from Slytherin, you know.”

“I did know,” Snape says softly, some memory private to him passing through his mind. A second later, the man shakes his head and turns, casting a practised eye at the devastation around them. “Detention, Mr. Weasley. Every week for the rest of the term, and likely most of the next.”

“Tutelage, please, Professor,” Percy says instantly. “Detentions go on your record.”

“Thirty, and still worried about your record, are we?” Snape says, rolling his eyes.

“If I survive this war, I’ll be trapped here forever, Professor,” Percy responds, injured. “Why would I deliberately sabotage my future?”

Snape gives him a piercing look. “So you cannot return.”

“No.” Percy licks his dry lips and then adds, “In truth, I do not know if the timeline I left still exists, or whether I…”

“Destroyed it,” completes Snape. He too hesitates before his next words. “You felt the death of your brother was sufficient motivation for you to leave your timeline and never return?”

Percy’s first reaction is outrage, mingled with shame, as if Snape’s words cast aspersions on Percy’s entire existence for the last seven years. And then he forces himself not to react, and instead to answer honestly. “I believe my brother’s death was the impetus for my actions. But my motivation was my own shame. My guilt, my complicity, even.”

Admitting this is less painful than it would have been a few years ago, but nevertheless Percy cannot resist flicking his gaze toward the floor, unable to meet Snape’s eyes as he admits this. *My selfishness is not without value*, he reminds himself forcibly, though the words ring less true than they have in the past.

“And now?” Snape says, with a curious intensity. “Do you feel as though your guilt has been —absolved?”

Percy, for all of his insistence on logic and reason and critical thinking, answers this question by considering it, and then assessing whether he feels sick to his stomach. “Not yet,” he replies slowly, and he is unsurprised to learn that the Veritaserum agrees with him. “But I feel as though it *will*, when I am finished with my task.”

Whether this is the correct answer or not remains a mystery. Percy watches as Snape comes to some private decision and then nods to himself. “Why did you say nothing? You have had seven years in this world, if your story is to be believed. You did not feel it wise to inform another? The Headmaster, your parents, your precious Professor McGonagall?”

“I told Myrtle,” Percy points out.

“Ah, yes. A ghost. The most useful of compatriots,” Snape drawls sarcastically. “Am I to believe you kept silent so that you may secure your own glory?”

Percy begins to speak, to defend himself, but falters. The immensity of explaining himself, the terrible isolation and sense of urgency, his conviction that he must not change the timeline

unduly—"Your first instinct was to kill me, or Obliviate me," he says finally, though aware of the inadequacy of his response. "I do not think Dumbledore would have even hesitated. Professor, though you may believe otherwise, I did not embark on this task for my own glory. I considered asking for help multiple times, but I could not risk it."

Snape considers this quietly. What goes unsaid between them is that any alternate road Percy could have taken would have led directly to Dumbledore, eventually. "And me?" Snape asks, his voice low. "You said you are—aware of my role in this drama."

Percy waits, but Snape does not seem to bring himself to ask the next question. Percy answers it anyway. "I thought you were not interested in my mediocrity."

Back on common ground, Snape raises a mocking eyebrow and purrs, "I see that you took my comments to heart."

"Of course I did!" Percy exclaims, his cheeks flushing crimson. "Did you think your regard was not…important to me?" He stops, chest heaving, wishing abruptly that he could sink through the floor and disappear.

"You were treading down a dangerous path," Snape says coldly. "It would serve you well if everyone whose attention you have attracted thinks as little of you as I."

“Well, I thank you not to admonish me for keeping my secret private,” Percy responds testily. “I believe the Dark Lord must return in corporeal form before *anyone* may hope to destroy him, which if the timeline remains unchanged, will occur in over eighteen months’ time. I’m interested to hear what you think I ought to have done instead.”

“Had you told me *years* ago, we could be more ready.”

“And how, might I ask, should I have determined you would be a trustworthy partner?” Percy snaps back. “We did not speak often in the previous timeline; I have only Harry’s word that you are not the Death Eater you appeared to be.”

“And in this timeline? Did you believe I gave every student the attention I deigned to spare on you?”

“And we return once again to the fact that you *tired* of me, Snape.” Percy barks out a laugh and shakes his head. “There are many things I would do differently if I went through this charade of a life for a third time, and many things I hope to do differently with the time I have left. But I know what is like to not be respected, and I will not purposefully put myself through that unless it is necessary to achieve my goals. I sought you out to learn from you, and I tried to be as honest with you as I could.”

Percy hesitates, but when Snape does not say anything, he continues, feeling his heart beat combatively in his throat.

“I am, I admit, relieved you have found out my secret. I will provide you with notes from the previous timeline, as well as my research on Horcruxes, and I hope together we can find a

way to defeat the Dark Lord. I will not stand in your way, nor lie, nor try and Obliviate you. But I will not be your partner if you do not respect me enough to treat me as an equal."

Snape watches him quietly and then turns to open the door. "You ought to be examined by Madam Pomfrey," is all that he says. "I need to think more of what I have learned tonight."

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Percy spends the night in the Hospital Wing, ostensibly for magical exhaustion, which is embarrassing for a wizard of his age and calibre, though it allows him to avoid the questioning eyes of his housemates for the evening. He also finds a small measure of comfort in the dark, silent Hospital Wing, with its rows of empty beds and bobbing lanterns, its crisp white sheets. Madam Pomfrey offers to set up privacy hangings around his bed, but he declines.

Devoid of his hangings, devoid of his bed, devoid of his own belongings, he can almost pretend that he *is* in the Hospital Wing for magical exhaustion, and that he has left the diary in his bedroom rather than risk exposure. He can imagine that Tom is still just a quill stroke away, rather than potentially destroyed forever.

Percy alternates between thinking wretchedly of the events of the night and avoiding them, like he might be unable to resist pressing on a painful bruise as it heals to monitor its progress, but as the night slips into the early hours of morning and he is still awake, he cannot prevent himself from admitting to himself that what he is feeling is sorrow.

To have Tom *inside* of him—his magic sparking over Percy's, his thoughts jumping in Percy's head, his memories melding with Percy's own—had been incredibly intimate, and incredibly exciting, and even now, Percy's own magic feels oddly bereft. To have Tom wrenched from him so abruptly…

He has not seen Myrtle all evening, but he can imagine what Myrtle may say. *Will you be able to kill him, when you have to?*

He had never thought he would not have the *choice.*

In his own way, he is relieved to have told Snape, though he imagines that adjusting to working with the other man will take some compromising on both sides. Despite the unforeseen shock of having Snape catch him in such an incriminating position, Percy finds that his mind does not want to linger on his newfound partnership with Snape.

No, once he allows himself to think about Tom, he cannot *stop* thinking about Tom, about wondering with a heavy stomach whether he destroyed Tom, or whether Tom destroyed himself.

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Snape does not meet his eyes during their Potions class, though Percy also sits toward the back, shielding himself as best he can with a tall, iron cauldron. He watches Snape as the man goes through the lesson, walking the class through the recipe chalked on the board, and demonstrating the proper way to crush the Sopophorous beans to best produce liquid.

Percy does not know where he'd summoned the courage to speak so openly—and, dare he say, rudely—to Snape, but he does not find that he regrets it. He is relieved to have told Snape, yes; but he is very much Snape's equal, at least in age if not magical knowledge. Percy has tangled with the Dark Lord, has had his soul in his body, has commanded his basilisk and faced off with his memories. He does not think it fair that he is so easily disregarded.

After class, he stops by Snape's desk and hands over a neatly bound set of scrolls. He'd spent a few hours in the morning carefully transcribing the key details of the previous timeline, as well as writing a short summary of his research on Horcruxes and what he'd learned from Tom. "As discussed, sir," he says coldly but politely.

"Mr. Weasley—" Snape begins, but Percy smiles tightly and inclines his head.

"I will await your comments, if you find an area on which I did not adequately expand."

Snape had kept both the diary and the diadem, which Percy does not precisely begrudge, given that if their positions were reversed, he would have done the same. And so he does not allow himself to assume that both are destroyed. Percy will give Snape until the end of term to decide whether he wants to work with Percy as equals, but he thinks he will be well within his rights to demand to see the Horcruxes whenever he chooses.

During the day, he does not think of Tom, choosing instead to sit with Landon or Henry at every meal, if only to force his mind to focus on the conversation at hand rather than the last words he'd heard from Tom echoing in his mind. Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday all pass similarly, though he cannot prevent his fingers from flexing around an imaginary quill at night, when he stares up at his dark red hangings and allows himself all the worry and anxiety and stress that he does not permit during daylight hours.

If the diary and diadem are both destroyed—*if*—then Percy will have to proceed with the other Horcruxes. As soon as he leaves Hogwarts, he will have the freedom to investigate the Gaunt and Riddle family estates, to continue chasing after Hufflepuff's cup, and to see if he can more successfully inveigle information out of whatever seedy members of society still remember Tom Riddle. His task for the next six months will be to ensure that Pettigrew escapes to resurrect the Dark Lord, and to use the Hogwarts library for the last few times to take any additional notes. Given that Tom corrupted the diadem for his own purposes, Percy has to assume any of the other Founders Artefacts are of fair game, and he supposes that Hogwarts is likely to have the best collection of literature on the Founders in all of Britain.

Myrtle is of the opinion that Percy should humble himself in front of Snape, which annoys Percy to no end, and so he finds himself speaking to her in clipped, irritated tones when they meet on Sunday night to discuss their next moves.

"There's no need to be nasty," Myrtle sniffs when Percy snaps at her. "If you are going to claim that your *task* is not about your ego, then you ought to take advantage of whatever resources are available to you, regardless of how much it pains you to do so."

"I gave Snape my notes," protests Percy, feeling nettled. "I wrote them down in detail and provided them to him as soon as I could. Snape is the one who does not seem interested in working with *me*."

For Snape continues to ignore Percy, even as the weekend turns into the week, and Percy finds to some surprise that there is only nine days before the winter holidays.

"You should apologise to him," says Myrtle when they meet on Tuesday evening. "Percy, you're leaving Hogwarts. It would be nice if you were on speaking terms with the only other person that knows your secret."

"For you, maybe," grouches Percy.

Myrtle gives him a sideways look. "So can I speak to him?"

Percy waves a hand at her, feeling uncharitable at the thought of Myrtle speaking to Snape, but unable to elucidate why. "Knock yourself out."

On the following Monday, with only a few days of school remaining until the term ends, Snape calls Percy to his desk at the end of class.

"I have considered your proposal," he says, a glimmer of meaning in his dark eyes that Percy feels unable to decipher. "I believe it has merit and I would like to discuss how to proceed. Have you time after your last class concludes?"

Percy pauses. He parses the sentence, turning it over in his mind, but to his surprise, he cannot find a hint of condescension. This, he realises suddenly, is as close to an apology as he will likely ever get from Snape.

The question is—ought he to accept it?

He thinks of the look on Myrtle's face if he were to report to her that he refused Snape's olive branch and sighs heavily.

"Yes," he says, both to answer his question and Snape's. "I can meet after supper tonight."

Snape nods slowly. "I will see you at my office."

Percy, of course, worries incessantly throughout supper, pushing around the brown rice on his plate without much conviction. He feels like he has asserted himself—but then had he just undone his progress by allowing Snape to dictate the terms of their partnership all the same? He should be prepared to lead the session; if he allows their meetings to assume the dynamic

of Snape as the professor, he'll never be able to break out of it. What is most important to cover: Horcruxes, Tom, or the timeline? Will Snape judge him if he reveals how close he became to Tom?

"Are you feeling ill, Percy?" Henry asks him carefully. Percy gives a tremendous start and narrowly avoids flinging a green bean off the edge of his fork.

"Sorry?"

"You've been a bit…"

"Weird," chimes in Mariana helpfully. "Is it the NEWTs? I hear Landon is giving you quite the run for your money."

Percy looks at them and notices absently that they are sitting very closely together, their shoulders touching. He wonders, for a wild second, how quickly Henry will propose to her, whether they will be married or even parents by the time that Percy has finished his lonely mission, before he can even contemplate finding another person to share his life with. It makes him feel—old, and incredibly weary. And if they are so intimate already, why are they sitting with him? As a chaperone, perhaps? Ought he be offended?

Percy has a sudden, vivid image of how lonely his mealtimes will be in just a few months and has to repress a loud gust of a sigh. Perhaps they merely enjoy his company, he thinks to himself sardonically, though he cannot imagine he has been particularly easy to be friends with, particularly of late. "Thank you for asking," he says instead. "It's rather silly, I suppose."

Mariana smiles cheerfully at him. "Last week I had a meltdown when I couldn't cast a shielding charm nonverbally," she reveals with a wink. "I'd asked Henry to *Silence* me so that I couldn't cheat, but then I couldn't get his attention either."

Henry nods solemnly. "I turned around and she was sobbing," he says, nudging Mariana with his shoulder. "Completely silent, full-fledged tears. Rather funny, to be honest."

Mariana snorts. "Prat."

"What's on your mind?" Henry persists.

Percy gives the tiniest of shrugs with his own shoulders, glancing automatically toward the Head Table before he can help himself. Snape is not there; likely he's in his office, pacing back and forth, and building a strategy to defeat Percy and render him obsolete. "It's Snape, if you can believe it. I had enlisted his help at the beginning of the year with a project, and he'd all but told me it was useless and I was wasting his time, so I stormed off somewhat dramatically. But just now, after class, he told me that he'd reconsidered, and asked me to report to his office after supper."

Heney furrows his brow. "That's good, though, right?"

Mariana gives him an exasperated glance and then turns warm eyes on Percy. “I completely understand,” she says with a small, conspiratorial smile. “Now you’re wondering how to go back to him without completely minimising the tantrum you threw.”

“Well, yes,” Percy admits. “Although I would not be so quick to use the word *tantrum*.”

Mariana winks at him. “I’ve never understood how you work so closely with Snape; when he looks at me, I feel like I’m a Flobberworm shrivelling on the floor. I’m glad you stormed out, and I’m glad he asked you back. It means he must think you really have something of value in your project, Percy. I mean, he’s all but eating his words. Can you imagine what it would take for Snape to do that?”

Percy thinks about his prickly Potions professor, and his secret loyalty to the ghost of Lily Evans through two terrible Wizarding wars and has to concede that Mariana may have a point. “So, polite but firm,” he summarises before letting out the sigh that he’s been containing throughout the meal. “Easier said than done.”

“Don’t lose your temper, or you’ll lose all chance of winning his respect,” Mariana confirms with a nod.

“I don’t know that I agree with that,” Henry objects. “Sometimes I find it useful to lose my temper. Well, to assert myself a bit.”

Mariana gives Henry a pitying look. “Because you are a rich pureblood heir, my dear, and everyone knows that you want your heirs to have some bite to them.” She turns back to Percy and, widening her eyes dramatically, says, “Just pretend that you’re a girl, and you’re facing a judgemental society aunt, and go from there.”

Far from being insulted at the comparison, Percy finds to his surprise that he is warmed by Mariana’s understanding, and he even lets out a surprised huff of laughter. “Pretend that Snape is my Auntie Muriel,” he says, pretending to take notes. “Got it. Thanks, Mariana.”

She turns back to her plate. “Show Snape what it means to be a Gryffindor, you got it? You’re the only one with the nerves to tangle with him, so it’s the least you can do for the House at large. Henry will give you five points if you make it out of the meeting alive.”

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With Mariana’s words ringing in his ears, Percy goes to Snape’s office directly after supper, his head held high. He raps authoritatively on the door, and when he hears Snape’s voice directing him to enter, he walks in without hesitation.

An unexpected sight: Myrtle, sobbing, and floating in the centre of the room.

"*Must* you," Percy says angrily, turning on Snape, the admonition escaping him before he can remember his plan to stay polite and strong.

"I fail to see why you felt this pathetic excuse for a ghost would be of any use to our operation," Snape hisses back, needing no preparation to go leap onto the offensive. "What you propose would set us against the most powerful Dark Lord of our time. We must conduct ourselves as though we are waging a war, not playing at some schoolyard mystery."

"Myrtle has a right to be here," Percy says, holding out a hand to the ghost. Although—how had she known to be here? She flies to his side and takes his hand, and he automatically suppresses a wince from the cold. "Her death is what started it all, and she's been helping me. She's trustworthy, and she can be useful to the operation."

"There is no sense of poetic justice in the real world, Weasley," Snape replies, unmoved. "I do not care about anyone's 'right' to be involved. Her death means nothing; he would have killed someone else, if she were not there."

Myrtle lifts her head and stares at him through eyes gleaming with pearly tears. "I may not have a right to be involved but it would be a mistake to discount me," she sniffs haughtily. "Everyone overlooks ghosts. I can turn invisible, float through walls, and I can't be hurt. Only an idiot would throw that advantage away."

Percy feels very proud of Myrtle, right then. He squeezes her hand before remembering that she would not feel the difference.

Snape breaks his gaze after a contemplative second. "Your defender already pointed out you cannot be Obliviated, though I should warn you I know spells to banish you to the afterlife."

Myrtle looks up eagerly. "Really?"

Percy hides a grin as Snape stares at her, nonplussed. He can see when Snape visibly decides to shift his attention instead to Percy. "Nobody else is to know, or I shall Obliviate you myself."

Percy nods curtly.

"Very well. We shall proceed." Snape walks back to his desk and sits, interlocking his fingers thoughtfully. Percy takes a seat, and Myrtle hovers beside him. "How would you like to begin?"

For a second, Percy is thrown by the question, having expected Snape to take the reins of the conversation and never hand them back. Then he thinks again of his conversation with Mariana and swallows, straightening his shoulders. "Well, I believe there are three main categories of interest: reviewing the events of the previous timeline, discussing the known Horcruxes, and charting out our next move."

Snape nods thoughtfully, noting something down in a small, black, leatherbound notebook on his desk that looks uncomfortably similar to Tom Riddle's diary. "I believe our time together would be best suited to the latter two categories," he says. "I have reviewed the notes that you left for me in detail, and I believe we can continue to deepen our shared understanding of the intricacies of the timeline asynchronously."

“I agree.” Percy pauses and then offers self-consciously, “I can provide—memories, though much of what I know is derived through my own research and not my…participation.”

Snape regards Percy but does not comment, instead nodding briskly. "I conducted some research into Horcruxes since we…last spoke and was able to corroborate your initial hypothesis, crude and rudimentary as it may be. Creating a Horcrux requires both an act of murder and a ritual consisting of several incantations, a potion of which I cannot find a clear description, and tremendous willpower. Somehow, the ritual harnesses the power of death to split one's soul and store it in an appointed vessel."

Myrtle pipes up, her voice soft and hesitant. "The soul splits at death, we believe. That is—Percy and I have discussed it."

Snape's voice is perfectly cordially, though slightly strained, when he responds "Please...elaborate, Miss—"

"Warren," Percy says, enjoying the pained look on Snape’s face despite his resolve to remain *mature* and above small pettiness.

Myrtle tells Snape what she told Percy once: that at the moment of death, she was given what felt like a choice, to stay or to remain. After choosing to stay, she felt very much the same, but paler, an incomplete version of what she remembers being when alive. After a moment’s hesitation, Percy pulls out the Map, but they cannot find Tom Riddle’s name. Unfortunately, as he explains to Snape, that is not conclusive evidence to prove either Horcrux was destroyed.

"The Horcruxes seem to be capable of gaining or losing strength," Percy explains.

Snape looks fascinated. The sneer drops from his lips as he twists them in thought. "We will have to see if destroying them requires some sort of purification," he muses.

"You think the Fiendfyre did not destroy the Horcrux?"

"There is a possibility they feed off Dark Magic," Snape cautions. "It bears experimentation. We must begin examining the diary and the diadem as soon as possible."

Percy feels the amicable atmosphere of the last few minutes drop away. "We cannot touch the diary until Tom has told us what we need to know."

Snape shakes his head. "Do not be foolish, Weasley. The diary is likely destroyed, and if it is not, we cannot risk either of us being taken in by the Horcrux. We do not know how the Fiendfyre changed it."

"But we have no way of learning what else would be a Horcrux," he insists, leaning forward. "Would you have thought the first one he made would be his schoolboy diary? We cannot go forward on mere conjecture."

Snape is unmoved. "Even if I believed the diary were still active, the risk of possession is too great," he counters. "Also, we have no guarantee he would be able to tell us what he needs to

know, or that he even succeeded in making seven."

Percy thinks back to that conversation he had with Harry, so long ago now.

"He succeeded," he says firmly.

Snape allows himself a sigh. "I would venture to guess the same."

"More so than three or thirteen?" Myrtle ventures.

"I believe so," Snape answers her. He seems to have decided to treat Myrtle like he would a student; his voice is far more neutral and reserved than when he's viciously insulting Percy. "I believe he would have made three and felt no real adverse side effects. Why stop there? After he reaches seven, however, it's likely he could not go further. To split a soul seven times already pushes the boundary of rationality."

"I think we need to try and awaken Tom."

Myrtle is the one to protest this time. "Percy, it's too risky."

"If the timeline remains the same, then we have just under eighteen months until He returns," Percy protests. "And I'm not sure we should destroy any more of the Horcruxes until that day. We need to be ready to move quickly after his return, and Tom is our best lead."

Snape considers this. "Your idea is not without merit." While Percy is reeling from the shock of being complimented (or, at least, validated) by Snape, the other man continues crisply, "Under three conditions: the first, you must check in with me twice a day, leaving the diary with the either the ghost or I. We will agree on a password for the following meeting. If you fail to meet with us, we will end the experiment immediately."

Reasonable. Percy nods mutely.

"The second, is that you shall leave with me this Map," Snape says. "If you do fail to check in, I need to be able to find you instantly."

"I need it," Percy protests.

"For what, sneaking around? If you cannot conduct yourself with stealth without the crutch of a map, you ought to focus on remedying that immediately."

"Fine," he acquiesces grumpily. "And the last?"

Snape's attention feels uncomfortably like that of the basilisk: intense and technically harmless, until it isn't. "I do not imagine that you have told me everything. You must set aside a selection of memories and notes for me, regarding any…*initiatives* that you may be pursuing privately. Imagine that the diary kills you, or forces us to Obliviate you. You must make it so that we are able to succeed in this without you."

Percy gulps, but he can see the logic in what Snape is saying. "Fine, but you shan't look at it until it becomes necessary. I won't have you killing me because you think I am irrelevant."

"Agreed," Snape says smoothly. "Come before breakfast and after supper every day. The first password shall be the name of that insipid proposal you submitted to Minerva."

Percy uses all of his self control not to react. Snape is just needling him, and he won't give him the satisfaction of responding predictably. "Agreed," he says. “Shall we begin?”

Percy knows an impressive number of spells to examine living and inert objects, to assess their magical properties, to diagnose recent magical activity, and to unearth any hidden traps or wards. Snape, as it turns out, knows even more. Between the two of them, it takes nearly the entire evening to exhaust their shared knowledge of these spells, only for Snape to conclude rather definitively that the diary is just that: old pieces of parchment, bound by twine and leather.

“Fiendfyre must destroy a Horcrux,” Snape muses, ignoring Percy’s muttered disagreement with ease. “The question remains—was the diadem similarly afflicted, and if so, why not?”

“But Tom—through me—cast the Fiendfyre,” insists Percy, for the third or fourth time. “Why would the spell destroy the diary?”

“Dark magic is not easily controlled,” says Snape silkily. “Or have you already forgotten our discussion?”

Percy thinks of the flames forming the great head of the basilisk, fire dancing around the crown of its head, and the feeling of dark, oppressive magic that rose in its wake. “But the diary was not *burnt*.”

“Perhaps Tom exhausted himself,” Myrtle pipes up. Percy starts; Myrtle has been uncharacteristically silent over the past few hours, watching as Snape and Percy tried their hands at magic. “What *powers* a Horcrux?”

“You may as well ask what powers a person,” snaps back Percy, though he regrets it, a second later, when Myrtle gives him a look of betrayal. He sighs, using one hand to pinch the bridge of his nose under his glasses. “All I meant to say was, if a Horcrux is part of a soul, magical exhaustion does not *kill* a person, it merely…exhausts them.”

Snape leans forward, looking at the diary with renewed interest. “But using Dark spells can harm the soul,” he says musingly. “I imagine you have not forgotten *that* part of our little talk, have you, Mr. Weasley?”

“*Percy*,” he insists, a cold feeling forming in the pit of his stomach. He can see what Snape and Myrtle are implying. If it is true that to use Dark spells harms the soul indelibly—rips it, tears it, frays it at its ends—then perhaps it is true that Tom took it too far with the burst of Fiendfyre and tore himself into irretrievable pieces. “But from one spell?”

“Consider the diary,” Snape says. “Consider Tom. If he were capable of using Dark spells, do you not think he would have long-ago utilised that skill? He may have grown arrogant. Your magical core is strong, but your capacity for Dark magic is not, regardless of what you may believe you are accomplishing with your little spells and rituals that you pretend not to

engage in. You say that you fought against his desire to use Fiendfyre. He would have exerted himself greatly in trying to assert his will against yours."

"And Dark magic is magic of wills," says Percy reluctantly. "So by fighting with him—"

"You may have forced his hand." Snape leans back in his chair and gives Percy an inscrutable look from under his surprisingly long lashes. "I would congratulate you, if it were not clear that you are not pleased by this news."

It is not that Percy *misses* Tom, or regrets fighting against his desire to use Fiendfyre, no matter what Snape may be implying in those long, meaningful looks. Percy thinks about it several hours later, after their impromptu session on the diary was broken up by a combination of irritability and exhaustion and the great clock chiming for curfew, wrapped tightly in his blankets in the protection of his bed. He regrets that if he *were* the cause of Tom's demise, that he had not known that was something he could have achieved, that he failed to *reason* with Tom just at the moment most critical for him to try.

But Percy cannot truly believe that Tom would have exhausted himself with a spell as simple as Fiendfyre. He supposes Fiendfyre is quite complicated; it is one of the few ways to magically destroy an object beyond repair, which is a task far more difficult than it may immediately seem, given the general resilience of magic. But even a sliver of Tom Riddle's soul would be capable of extreme feats of Dark magic. How could one single spell rid the world so quickly of Tom? Percy simply cannot wrap his head around the truth, and so despite Myrtle and Snape's convictions to the contrary, he stubbornly continues to insist that the diary is not yet destroyed, and Tom is not yet lost to them forever.

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The next morning, when he goes to check in with Snape after a light breakfast—nothing seems to be sitting well in his stomach, even though Mariana pushes the steaming bowl of oatmeal toward him optimistically—the other man is pacing back and forth.

"Sirius Black is innocent?" Snape asks without preamble.

Percy blinks. "Er, yes. Didn't we cover that?"

Snape motions irritatedly to the Map, which Percy belatedly realises is spread over his desk. "And you are *sure* he did not work together with Pettigrew."

"If he did, he was quite the liar," Percy says doubtfully. He had never spoken to Sirius Black in the original timeline, but he had housed the Order safely, as far as Percy was aware, and certainly Harry had spoken of him like he was the paragon of Gryffindor honour and virtue.

Snape hisses a bitter laugh. "Sirius Black is many things; lying is but the least of his crimes."

"He wasn't working with Pettigrew, I'm fairly sure of that," Percy insists. He knows Pettigrew died, somehow, in the war, but he does not know the details. He'd thought it fairly irrelevant at the time. He knows that Pettigrew flees at the end of the year and somehow is responsible for resurrecting the Dark Lord. This much Scrimgeour had gleaned from Fudge or Dumbledore and passed down to Percy in private, though the official Ministry stance on Sirius Black had not changed throughout the war, Black providing a convenient scapegoat for both sides.

"And you did not yet turn Pettigrew in," Snape muses, barely listening. "We need him to ensure the Dark Lord returns, but how do we know he will act as he did before? How do we prevent the rat from fleeing?"

"He knows Black is on the loose," Percy offers. "Surely we can frighten him into staying close to Dumbledore until the end of the year."

"Yes, yes," Snape muses absently. He slows to a halt and turns on his heel to peer intently at Percy. "And Black, he needs to remain alive?"

Percy tries fervently to pretend he doesn't know Snape is looking for the blessings to murder Sirius. He did not know Sirius very well in the last timeline, but even he knows that Snape hated the other man. Ron had described it once as *loathing,* during the funeral that Harry had held for Sirius after the war. "Er, yes, I believe so," he says before clearing his throat. He hopes he looks appropriately stern. "Yes. Harry needs him, and I believe Dumbledore uses his ancestral house for a safe house, for the Order."

Snape rolls his eyes. "He would," he mutters darkly. "What is Black waiting for, then?"

"I believe he is trying to kill Pettigrew, but he does not know how to get at him," Percy says. "The wards are rather tight, you know. He's already tried to break in, though he only really succeeded at scaring the Gryffindor boys' dormitory."

"They deserve a scare or two," Snape says musingly. "Well, we shall have to let that continue."

"That's rather mature of you," Percy says dryly.

Snape gives him a smirk. "In addition to my own personal enjoyment, we mustn't tip our hand. If we make it too difficult for him, he may run off and ruin the timeline further. We must keep an eye on Pettigrew, though. Can't have him running off too early either. What happens when it all comes to a head?"

That fiasco he had remembered all too well. The Minister had arrived at Hogwarts to execute the hippogriff that injured Draco, Black had been captured and scheduled for the Dementors, and then had implausibly vanished. Percy has a suspicion that Pettigrew had been involved, though he had admitted to Snape last night that he was not entirely sure. "Just what I had said last night. Somehow Sirius Black is captured, and Fudge comes to Hogwarts to take him back to Azkaban. There is some altercation that lands Ron in the hospital wing, and then Black disappears. Then Ron comes home that summer insisting Sirius Black is innocent and Scabbers is Peter Pettigrew."

“How did your parents take that?” Snape is definitely smiling now. “That their thirteen year old son cared for a thirty year old man.”

“They were mostly furious with Dumbledore, as I recall,” Percy says. There were lots of Floo calls that summer between his parents and Dumbledore, though now he belatedly realises that Dumbledore may have begun re-forming the Order. His parents had confirmed that Scabbers was Pettigrew in private to Percy, but they had not seemed nearly as concerned that Percy had cared for a Death Eater for a number of years. Percy does not know whether their worry for Ron was due to Ron’s age or his proximity to Harry, but either way, he still feels as though they should have been more worried for *him.*

“And Pettigrew?”

“All that Scrimgeour told me was that Pettigrew was responsible for resurrecting the Dark Lord,” Percy repeats. “I believe that Dumbledore had told Fudge, and Fudge had told Scrimgeour, since I do not think Dumbledore and Scrimgeour spoke very often.”

Snape nods thoughtfully. “I might have some theories. Well, I am both heartened and disappointed to see you have failed to wake the Dark Lord for another evening. Tonight, we shall meet at 9:17 exactly, and the password shall be the grade you expect to receive on today’s exam.”

“But there is no exam in Potions today.”

Percy may be a full grown man himself, but Snape’s dark look of amusement will always send shivers down his spine. “Isn’t there?”

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A few days later, Percy notices Harry sneaking past him with his Cloak—someone should tell him that his trainers occasionally peek out the bottom—presumably to Hogsmeade. Percy figures he ought to head off Snape before the other man discovers his nemesis is openly flouting the rules and stops into his office before lunch.

To his utter surprise, Myrtle is already there.

From the books spread over the floor, Percy surmises Snape is once again trying to determine what precisely ghosts mean by a *split* at death. The other man is trying to reverse construct the ritual that must be required for the creation of the Horcrux. Percy finds the subject interesting, but he can admit privately he does not necessarily have the grasp of advanced Potions theory required to find it so gripping. It serves instead to make him feel reconciled to his choice of including Snape.

"You all look busy," Percy says to announce himself.

Snape barely looks up. "Some of us are capable of sustained concentration, yes."

Myrtle giggles. Percy does not like her friendship with Snape. Two less compatible people he can barely imagine. That, and he already can foresee that they will gang up on him.

"What are you researching?"

Snape pins him with a poisonous glare. "One wonders why you try to understand anything at all. Be gone, Mr. Weasley; go to Hogsmeade like the rest of your insipid peers. It has not escaped my attention Mr. Potter is on his way right now."

Well, fine. If they do not need Percy here, he will not bother to stay. He has his own plans to pursue. "This serves as my check in with both of you," Percy says. He holds out the diary, which he faithfully relinquishes to Myrtle each night, though Tom still has not awoken from whatever stasis binds him. "Tomorrow morning we shall meet at 6:19 AM and the password shall be the portrait Sirius Black attacked."

Snape summons the diary and examines it. "I shall take the night to analyse this," he muses.

Percy responds immediately. "Do not write in it."

"Jealous I may usurp you in the eyes of the Dark Lord?" Snape drawls. "I am surprised he has not yet tired of you. By now I expect you have found the location of all five remaining Horcruxes? Or wait, he is not responding to you, is he?"

Percy glowers blackly at him. Myrtle does not help by swooping to Percy's side and saying eagerly, "Do you think he is ignoring you?"

"I haven't been able to ask, Myrtle."

"Subtlety, thy name is Percy Weasley," Snape says, turning his attention back to the diary. "If we can somehow *measure* the amount of soul—a ridiculous proposition, but perhaps…"

“It only showed up on the Map *after* it possessed Percy,” Myrtle chimes in, looking over Snape’s shoulder.

“We know that the fact that neither this nor the diadem appear on the Map does not necessarily imply they are destroyed,” Snape muses. “We shall have to devise another test.”

"How are you planning to find the other Horcrux locations, then?" Percy says combatively. Snape’s earlier comment still smarts.

Snape raises an unimpressed eyebrow at Percy's outburst. "Logic," he says easily. "Who had this in his possession?"

"Lucius Malfoy."

"Who else might the Dark Lord have trusted as such?"

Percy thinks about this. "His main followers in school were Nott and Malfoy—the elder Malfoy, that is. Dresden Greengrass, the Parkinson boy, the elder Black."

"Nearly all of them are dead," Snape says shortly. "I posit: Yaxley; Lestrange; and yes, perhaps Nott."

"But he wouldn't have given all of his Horcruxes over," Percy protests. "He's far too clever for that. I think he would put them in places of importance, places of meaning. Tom likes symbolism."

"And the *symbolism* of Lucius Malfoy?" Snape says skeptically. Myrtle watches their back and forth, eyes wide.

"Tom favoured Abraxas," Percy says. "He was very beautiful, very charming. The rich and perfect heir Tom always longed to be."

Snape snorts dismissively. "I doubt he chose Lucius because he reminded him of an attractive peer."

"No, I think he gave it to Abraxas," Percy protests. He's thinking of the memories Tom has shown him, the way Tom watches Abraxas with guarded envy, how Tom pretended to be a pureblood to Percy. "Abraxas is what Tom wants to be, the society Tom is locked out of unless he lies. Giving the Horcrux to the Malfoy heir is both symbolic and ironic—symbolic in that pureblood society is part of his soul, ironic in that Abraxas is guarding a half-blood. Not to mention the Malfoy family likely has protections."

"Tom did tell everyone he was a pureblood," Myrtle chimes in.

Snape does not admit Percy has made a good point, but he does not disparage it either, which Percy supposes is progress. "And where else would your beloved Tom hide a Horcrux?"

"Gringotts," Percy says immediately. "I think he would enjoy concealing a Horcrux in the Wizarding bank. Hogwarts, clearly. The orphanage where he grew up, as some sort of, er…"

"Up yours?" Myrtle says helpfully.

Percy flushes crimson. "Well, yes."

"You failed to mention he was raised in an *orphanage*," Snape hisses, making a note on a piece of parchment. "All information is vital, you philistine."

"A Muggle orphanage, but he did not say where." Percy ignores the insult with practice.

"So places motivated by spite," Snape muses. "A perversion of places the Dark Lord felt excluded from, or places he would have enjoyed the irony of polluting."

"Yes," Percy agrees. He has no trouble imagining that.

Snape nods to himself as if confirming something. "A plausible theory, I suppose, though you would do well to remember that you spoke to a sixteen year old memory of the Dark Lord and not the man himself. Now, come. I hope you were not intending on going to Hogsmeade; I want us to make a timeline of the next four years with as much detail as you can remember."

“Can’t I just give you my notes?” Percy says, for once not wanting to stay and work. He’d been looking forward to going to Hogsmeade by himself, to visiting the bookstore one last time before the holidays, to breathing some fresh air, to meeting his Housemates for a pint as the day began to darken.

Snape gives him a thin-lipped smile. “Are we not *partners*?”

Percy rolls his eyes and drops his bag to the floor.

***

Finally, it is time for the students to go home, though Percy is, thankfully, headed to visit his brother in Romania. He lingers after class to present Professor McGonagall with a Christmas card and some chocolates. He writes cards each year for all of his professors, even Snape, though he has never dared to give Snape anything more than a generic *Happy Christmas, Professor.* Certainly never chocolate.

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley. Tell Charles hello from me,” she says warmly. “I hope you have a restful holiday—you have been distracted of late. I expect you to return refreshed.”

Percy nods, chastised. He *has* been distracted of late; he hardly has thought about his research proposal. “Yes, Professor.”

“You would do well to learn about dragons while you are there,” she continues. “Dragon magic is curious; dragons are considered Dark creatures, yet they do not breathe cursed fire.”

Perhaps a dragon would destroy a Horcrux. This reminds him of another question he had been nursing, and he pauses to wait while Henrietta Thornstrople, the last straggler, finally locates her missing quill and leaves. “I was wondering about locator spells,” he says. “Obviously one can spell an object against basic locator spells, such as *Point Me.* Hogwarts is itself Unplottable, though within the wards, one can find the location of, say, a person or an office.”

“It is very difficult to truly ward something against all locator spells,” Professor McGonagall confirms, nodding. “I know there is a section in your proposal about the similarities between the Fidelius Charm and Unbreakable Vows, which both, in a way, render something more truly unplottable.”

“Well, I was wondering, if you had something with similar magical properties as the object that is unplottable, if you could exploit their similarities to *deduce* where the other object is,” Percy says carefully. He uses the lie he’d thought of previously. “For instance, my great aunt believes that a relative of hers unfairly laid claim to a goblin-made tiara her mother promised to her. This tiara, in addition to being goblin-made, was imbued with some additional protection spells, or something of the sort.”

Professor McGonagall purses her lips thoughtfully. “I see where you are going with this, and I do not disagree outright, but I am not entirely sure what you would use to *deduce* anything about the location of the tiara. I think you would have better luck with a reactive agent, instead of one congruent. Let me explain. I do not believe it is likely you could take another goblin-made tiara, enchant it with the same protection spells, and somehow *scry* for the original tiara. The tiara would have to have some form of sentience, I believe, for this to work.”

Promising. Percy nods eagerly and notes it down carefully.

“What you may be able to do, in that scenario, is go into places likely to have the original tiara—her attic, perhaps, or a Gringotts vault—and try to incite a magical *reaction*. The tiara is spelled to protect? Try to trigger those wards. Of course, I imagine if the tiara is in a Gringotts vault, there are easier ways to ascertain if an item is in one’s vault.”

Less promising. Percy has no intention of triggering any defence mechanisms the Horcruxes may be harbouring.

“Thank you, Professor.” He turns to go.

“I hope you will one day reveal what you are truly searching, Mr. Weasley,” she says, her voice sharp but not unkind. “I know a thread interlaces these questions and binds together your proposal. I do not need to know what it is to enjoy working with you, but I hope one day you will, nevertheless, assuage my curiosity.”

“I will,” he promises, and he means it. After coming clean to Snape, telling McGonagall would be a breeze. Perhaps after Dumbledore is dead.

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He has supper with his family, which inevitably includes Lee, Harry, and Hermione. He is pleased to learn that Ginny has struck up a firm friendship with Demelza Robins, who chatters away happily with the Quidditch players about her prospects for next year’s tryouts. They are all rather jealous of his trip to visit Charlie and spend the meal channelling that frustration into mockery of Percy and his nonexistent relationship with Tonks.

Harry, Percy notices, looks morose, pushing the peas around on his plate instead of eating them. Ron and Hermione shoot him continued, worried looks. Percy was never particularly close to the Trio in the last timeline, and so their dynamic interests him whenever he witnesses it. Harry is unquestionably the centre of focus; it is a wonder Ron allows it without feeling insecure and that Hermione is able to temper her ferocity to play second fiddle to Harry’s various dramas.

Percy sits with them in the Common Room after the meal, ignoring Ron’s not-so-subtle signalling that he is not welcome.

“Harry,” he says gently. “I cannot help but notice you are upset.”

Harry meets his eyes guardedly and shrugs one shoulder.

“Go away, Percy,” Ron moans, flopping down on the large, squishy armchair. “This is private business.”

“He might know something,” Hermione points out in a loud whisper that all three of them hear.

Percy raises an eyebrow. “Indeed, the likelihood that I know something relevant is indeed high.”

Ron remains combative. “Don’t you have any of your own friends to bother?”

Percy has not had anything more than a superficial conversation with his classmates in many weeks, save for the occasional meal shared with Henry, Mariana, or even Oliver. Even Landon, whose drive to beat Percy has been replaced by the general exam urgency plaguing all of the seventh years, seems to alternate between studying silently in the library with Percy, and studying silently in the library with his girlfriend. Percy ignores Ron and turns back to Harry. “If there is something I may help with, I would be happy to try,” he says softly.

Perhaps it is because Percy gave Harry the Map. Perhaps Harry is so desperate for answers that he takes the chance to trust Percy. Either way, Harry eyes him for another second before he leans forward urgently. “Do you know what a Secret Keeper is?”

Ah. Percy wonders who told Harry enough of the story to interest him but not enough to fill in all of the missing information. Black, perhaps?

“Is this about Sirius Black?"

“You knew?” Ron looks at him with as much betrayal as Harry. “And you didn’t say anything?”

“I don’t think it’s a secret, Ron,” Hermione says, shaking her head.

“You didn’t know?” Percy counters. He continues training his attention on Harry. “I thought you would have been told. I’m sorry; I would have said something sooner had I known.”

Harry gives a short nod and crosses his arms. “I should have been told,” he mumbles grumpily. “It’s true, then? Sirius Black betrayed my parents?”

Percy is in the midst of wishing he had not said anything. Where is Pettigrew? He casts a wordless *Point Me* and his wand tugs his hand toward the boys’ dormitory. For good measure, he raises a ward to protect against eavesdroppers. Hermione eyes him curiously but has the sense not to interrupt.

“It would appear that way, yes,” he says delicately. “Black—he never had a trial, but it is said he confessed after murdering the thirteen Muggles.”

Hermione leans forward, her eyes alight. “What do you mean, he never had a trial?”

“It was a confused time,” Percy says, in the uncomfortable position of excusing a system he disagrees heavily with himself. “I believe there was pressure to dispose quickly of all of the Death Eaters so that society could return to peace. Many supposed Death Eaters escaped Azkaban. Others received life sentences without a trial.”

“So it may not have been him?” Harry asks, his voice soft.

Ron interjects, shaking his head. “No, mate, he killed *thirteen people* with a single curse. If he was innocent, why would he do that?”

Why indeed. “The Fidelius Charm entrusts a secret within the soul of another person,” he explains, directing the conversation away from Black’s innocence. “Generally it is said that the Secret Keeper and the Secret must have some sort of resonance, if you will. For instance, it would be difficult for you lot to trust Draco with a secret, even if he consented to keep the secret for you, since you have a difficult relationship. Conversely, it would be, I imagine, rather easy for one of you to hold a secret for each other.”

Harry’s voice simultaneously has an edge and a tremble to it. “So if Sirius was trying to—to kill my dad, he wouldn’t have been able to keep the secret?”

Percy shakes his head. It is something he’s wondered about; how did Pettigrew keep the secret at all? Perhaps that was part of what drove him to tell it. The spell itself may have pushed him to it. “It would be more difficult, but not impossible.”

“And he wants to kill me,” Harry says flatly. “Why can’t they make *me* a secret?”

It’s a good idea, actually. Percy stores it for later. What can be kept, or not kept, a secret? A location, for sure, but a person? What about knowledge? A memory? A spell?

“I suggest you all read into it,” Percy deflects. “Harry, I know you have been warned against confronting Black, and I won’t tell you something you already know, but I really must add: innocent or not, he spent twelve years in prison. We don’t know why he’s broken out, or what he’s after. It very well may be you. Perhaps he does not want to kill you; maybe he feels that he must kidnap you and keep you safe in that way. Perhaps he wants to use you for bargaining power with the Minister to secure his freedom. Or, he does want to kill you. Twelve years with the Dementors would not be kind to anyone, innocent or otherwise. I really must insist that you three *stay together* and stay on your guard.”

They all nod solemnly, even Ron.

“To wit: I will teach you the spell I am using now. It is a mild Notice Me Not. Eavesdroppers trying to focus on our conversation will find their attention directed elsewhere. It will not work for someone intently trying to eavesdrop, but for casual use, it will suffice. You may find it in *Protective Magicks,* chapter five. Please feel free to find me if you struggle with its casting.”

Hermione looks positively gleeful. Percy hopes she learns some of the other spells in *Protective Magicks* and teaches them to the other two. Merlin knows they'll need them.

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The three days at home are awkward; Percy and his mother have an explosive, screaming fight about *family pride* that, in all truth, goes much the same as the first time around. The difference is that this time Arthur stays largely absent, as it is Molly's family at the centre of the argument instead of Arthur's job.

His weekend with Aunt Muriel is, as always, a relief. He tunes out her comments about half-bloods with practice and they spend an enjoyable afternoon cataloguing some of the artefacts in the Prewett vault. She has a veritable wealth of stories, which Percy hopes to share with his siblings one day.

Finally, *finally*, it is time for him to leave the country. The Floo to Romania is disorienting; easily the longest Floo Percy has ever been on. Tonks, predictably, tips forward directly to the floor. Percy wobbles but remains on his feet, his stomach roiling uncomfortably.

"Well you two are a pretty pair," says Charlie laughingly from a few steps away.

Percy and Tonks get to their feet, shakily gather their things from the bored attendants, and cross over to Charlie. He greets them with broad hugs, and Percy winces when he claps him heavily on the back.

"Charles!" Tonks says delightedly. "Let's get to what is important. Where's the man, then?"

Charlie's ears flush a gentle red. "I thought I would show you around the city a bit first, Nymphadora."

Tonks loops her arm around Charlie. Percy follows a heartbeat behind, feeling a little out of place in the face of their easy familiarity. "Can't he come?"

"He's on shift," Charlie explains, rolling his eyes. "You have plenty of time to ogle him. Now, I'll Apparate you to the reservation, and we'll drop off your things."

The reservation is exactly like Percy had imagined (and Charlie had described in many a letter): wide, grassy hills with singed patches, lending to the appearance of an elderly man with bald spots; small buildings with slanted roofs, made entirely out of some dark, shimmery metal; young men and women running around purposefully, some in the dark green that Charlie is wearing, others in orange, and a small number in blue; and dragons blotting out the sky.

Percy cannot help but stare, his mouth open in what is undoubtedly an unsightly manner. There are dragons of every size and colour, and every few seconds there is a hiss of fire or a screech of claws.

"How—how are they just flying around?" Percy stammers, tracking a small, vicious looking dragon that is sporting a horned head that is uncomfortably reminiscent of a basilisk.

"Did you think they'd all be in cages, or on a leash?" Charlie says, chuckling. He grabs Percy's bag and takes it into the cabin, ducking back out a second later.

"Well, yes," Percy admits.

Tonks is similarly enthralled, her eyes alight. Her hair is spiky and tipped with brilliant orange. "This is *wicked*."

"Very complex wards," Charlie explains. He traces an outline in the air. "See there—that copse of trees, that supply shed, that steam? Those are some of the boundaries of the wards."

Percy nods after another second of watching the dragons wheel in the sky. Yes, none of them pass the boundaries. "How?" Containing a dragon ought to be impossible. Dragons are Dark Creatures largely due to their inherent wildness; they could not be tamed nor controlled by anything but the cruellest measures.

"Old magic," Charlie explains with a shrug. "Elemental magic, I'd guess. It's why we aren't able to move the reservation, just add to it. The words are tied to something—the land, perhaps? I really couldn't say, but my boss would be able to tell you more."

They drop the topic for now, but Percy keeps watching the dragons snort fire at each other and trace complicated patterns across the sky. There is still much to magic he still does not know.

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Percy finds to his surprise that he quite likes Daniel, Charlie's chosen partner. ("Not *boyfriend,*" Charlie huffs in disgust when Tonks needles him about it. "*Boyfriend* makes me think we're sixteen and sneaking off to the Shrieking Shack."

Tonks' wicked reply had made them all go red together. Percy has no intention of thinking of his brother *shrieking*, thank you very much).

Daniel is Muggleborn, English but educated in Romania. He speaks seven different languages—Percy is rather jealous—and enjoys teasing Charlie about his uncultured upbringing. Charlie, far from being insulted about the ramshackle of the English countryside, takes pleasure in ribbing Daniel about his posh background.

Tonks and Percy discuss it later, laying side by side on two magically inflated mattresses in the cramped main room of the cabin Daniel and Charlie share with two other rangers. He wonders whether Tonks would be jealous that Charlie has so clearly moved on, but she seems happy, gushing over Daniel's dark curls and straight chin, the way he crinkles his brown eyes when he watches Charlie talk.

"What about you?" Percy finally asks her. "Any blokes at the Auror Academy?"

Tonks snorts and shakes her head. "I don't know a single Auror that would date another," she says. "I'd wondered at first; I mean, we all share a dorm, boys and girls. Showers, locker rooms, what have you. I wondered why they were so unconcerned. But there's absolutely no hanky panky. Something about the fact that we see each other every day covered in sweat and blood and tears, and not in a sexy way, you know. I can't imagine sleeping with any of them. Disappointing, since some of the lads are real fit."

Percy chuckles and lays back, adjusting the thin pillow. Well, her future husband is back at Hogwarts, looking thinner and more gaunt every day. "I have a feeling you'll find your partner in the most unexpected place," he says.

"I hope so," she says. "Like when you Floo somewhere and instead of crashing on the floor you fall straight into a handsome stranger's arms. That's my current plan."

"Ah, I'd wondered why you spent so much energy falling out of Floos and tripping over doorways. Waiting for someone to catch you."

"Prat."

Comfortable silence. Percy finds his attention turning back to the dragons, to their unconscious grace.

The next day, he asks the warden eagerly about the containment spell for the dragons. It’s linked to the land, as Charlie had mentioned. Elemental theory, perhaps; he makes a mental note to ask Professor McGonagall. Notably, though dragons are undeniably Dark, the spell is not considered Light. Similarly, though dragons are creatures of fire, controlling them does not require water.

The trainers corral the dragons by methods familiar to all that have worked with wild animals: incentives and punishments. There are few spells that can pierce a dragon’s hide, but the ones that do work are well known to all of the trainers. Magical cages and ropes, meat laced with sedative, and positive reinforcement are just some of the tools that Percy observes the trainers using throughout his time there.

He’s been thinking about it wrong, he realises with a sigh. Dark magic does not negate Light magic, not necessarily. He will have to revisit his knowledge of elemental theory. Scrying is a magic of water; perhaps he can use it to discern the Horcrux.

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January 1994

After the warm companionship of the last few weeks, the draughty isolation of Hogwarts bears a noticeable chill. Percy returns listlessly to his classes, listening mutely to his

yearmates chatter about their future plans. Professor McGonagall has not pushed him to make a decision, but he feels her watching him, waiting.

He has a letter, sealed and ready to be sent, sitting on his bedside table. It is addressed to one Mr. Crouch, and it contains Percy's application for his assistant position. Percy is fairly confident he will get the job; he included a brief summary of the relevant cauldron regulation that he painstakingly memorised all those years ago.

Landon is off to the Ministry as well, hoping to become an Unspeakable; Oliver is playing reserve; Mariana intends to travel. Henry will work with his father. Penny is going to America, to university. Sonali will be studying in India, staying with the outer branch of her family, much to Landon's chagrin. (Percy had pointed out that Landon can afford the International Portkeys, but Landon had said that was *not the point.)* Somehow all of his peers have plans, even frivolous. Sometimes he feels like the only one without direction.

He is nearly finished cleaning the Room of Hidden Things, trying to salvage any artefacts that survived the fire. Myrtle finds him one day toward the end of January, patiently casting diagnostic spells on a pouch of silver coins that melted together, designation unknown.

"We've not spent too much time together recently," she says hesitantly to announce herself.

Percy looks up and greets her before returning to the task at hand. "I am surprised at how well you and Snape are able to work together."

Myrtle tries to look nonchalant but Percy knows the compliment pleases her. "Thank you," she says. "I'm glad you included me. Merlin, I'm glad you talked to me, all those years ago. My life—my death, I suppose—has changed so much since that day." She hesitates and watches him sweep the coins back into the pouch. "I don't want you to banish me when you leave Hogwarts."

Percy has, honestly, completely forgotten about that promise. He squints up at her. "Why not?"

"I have something to do, now," Myrtle explains. "It's as if this was the reason I became a ghost. Tom Riddle killed me, and I am going to help kill them. Maybe that will free me; Anthony says there are reports of ghosts disappearing once their task is done."

Percy has never particularly subscribed to that point of view, but he nods, regardless. "I'm proud of you, then." He peers at her sideways and says, "Did you do something?"

"Sorry?"

"Did you talk to Snape?" It is something he's been wondering for a while, though not something he had felt comfortable enough to ask until the other side of the relaxing winter holidays.

"What do you mean?"

Percy gives her a look. "Did you talk to Snape and tell him to work with me?"

“No,” says Myrtle. Percy narrows his eyes at her but cannot tell if she is lying.

“How did you know to be there, that night? The first day, when I met Snape after supper? I didn’t tell you that he’d spoken to me.”

Myrtle flushes, her cheeks turning a smoky grey. “I didn’t tell him to work with you,” she says reluctantly. “I just mentioned that you had told me the secret too, and I felt that it was stupid of us not to pool our resources. I may have shouted at him a bit, to be honest."

Percy wants to be upset at her, but he can’t really find it in him. Myrtle has always been too nosy and interfering for her own good. He supposes that this time it has been for his own good as well.

They fall into silence as he finishes this quadrant and moves on to the next, beginning with a large, oak cabinet that is still smoking slightly, though it has been many weeks now.

It is an odd feeling to have his mission taken up by two others. Myrtle may feel charged with purpose but Percy feels rather the opposite. He supposes he should be happy he can relax, but some part of him feels jealous that he has so quickly been rendered useless. It is as if his own special quality was his advanced notice, and now that he has carefully transcribed his timeline for Snape, the other man hardly speaks to him. Percy had imagined a partnership of equals: feats of magic, maybe espionage. Not this.

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January is cold and biting, made all the chillier from the continued silence from the diary. Snape has not said anything, but Percy can tell that both he and Myrtle think Percy’s insistence on trying to reawaken Tom is pathetic at best, dangerous at worst. Percy watches Sirius and Pettigrew circle each other on the Map, but Tom is nowhere to be found.

And yet, Percy stubbornly refuses to admit that Tom has destroyed himself. Snape and Myrtle both disagree: after all, Percy’s last memory is of Tom casting Fiendfyre at his Horcrux. Percy had tried to deflect the spell, but it had been destructive enough to devour the entire room. Aim is hardly the most important consideration for Fiendfyre.

In his free time, Percy begins to linger around Hermione in a way that he hopes is not creepy. She definitely has a Time Turner; he notes the magical and physical signs of exhaustion that hang around her small, thin frame, watch her disappear and reappear implausibly between classes. Despite himself, he’s jealous. He certainly never was offered a Time Turner in either timeline.

He brings it up one day to Professor McGonagall, nettled when she snaps at him for his admittedly rushed revision of a particularly complex section on the Fidelius Charm. To be accurate, he snaps back, inquiring heatedly as to whether she cared so little for his work that she did not deem it necessary to give *him* a Time Turner over a thirteen year old.

This forestalls whatever impressive admonition Professor McGonagall had been building to in her irritation. Instead, she blinks at him from behind her thin frames. “Not that it is any of your business, but Miss Granger is serving as something as a trial subject for the Ministry,” she says crisply.

Percy wars with himself for a second before asking in a tone he fervently hopes is not childish, “And I was not considered?”

“The Headmaster specifically asked for a third year student,” McGonagall replies. He is fairly sure he was not successful in hiding his dismay. “Miss Granger was an obvious choice. The foolish girl is determined to take all of the electives.”

“Why?”

“You’ll have to ask her, I’m afraid.”

Percy shakes his head, thinking about Dumbledore requesting a third year child. Obviously it would be Hermione—but why? Why would he want Harry Potter’s best friend to be given a Time Turner? Did Hermione have it for the entire timeline? Was *that* how Harry escaped certain death so frequently?

Could Percy get a Time Turner? Would his body even allow him to use it?

“No,” he says belatedly. “I meant, why a third year student?”

Professor McGonagall clucks her tongue disapprovingly. “Thirteen year olds, I suppose, are the youngest age to which we would consider giving a Time Turner. I’m against the entire endeavour myself, to be honest.”

“Are you taking it back at the end of the year?”

“Yes, and I shall be locking it away myself, so don’t get any ideas, Mr. Weasley,” she says, raising an arch eyebrow. “Time Turners are more limiting than you would believe, I’m afraid. Particularly one that can only twist back roughly seven hours.”

Seven hours is plenty of time to right a wrong.

“Do not even *think* about it,” McGonagall intones harshly, undoubtedly seeing the calculating look steal into Percy’s eyes. “I will know it was you, and I *will* punish you, Mr. Weasley.”

“Why don’t more people have Time Turners? Clearly if they are being given to a third year, they’re not *dangerous*,” Percy says, refusing to acknowledge the validity of her concern.

Professor McGonagall settles into her chair and absent-mindedly pushes him a biscuit from the tray on her desk. He takes one, recognizing the look on her face. She means to teach him something. “Are you familiar with the basic principles of time magic?”

Percy tries to keep his face neutral. “Only the basics,” he says innocently.

“I am surprised. It seems like something you would have researched,” McGonagall comments accurately. She steeples her fingers together and continues. “Time magic is a very old branch of magic. To be frank, not much is known about it; very little has advanced in my lifetime, and likely several previous lifetimes. Even the Unspeakables in the Ministry are really only replicating past rituals, or utilising old spells. I mention its age because time magic shares something rather unique with other ancient branches of magic: it has a cost. Something must be paid.”

Percy frowns. This does not exactly correlate with his previous research on the topic.

She continues without giving him the chance to ask a question. “Time Turners demand the simplest cost of all: time. To use a Time Turner is to trade seconds, hours, days of your life for the chance to relive the past. You will continue to age. The cost is low, but so is the benefit. Very rarely are there recorded instances of a person actually changing the past.”

“It is a paradox,” Percy says, nodding. “You change the past and therefore you needed to change the past, so it is no longer a change.”

“Yes, I suppose,” McGonagall agrees slowly. “Other rituals demand more. The advantage of a Time Turner is you return to your timeline, as it were—which is also what drives the time paradox. There are rituals to permanently send you back or forward in time, but the price is high: you lose the life you had before. There is no returning to your original timeline.”

Yes, Percy is intimately familiar with this cost.

“The reason the Ministry does not make Time Turners widely available is because they are really not the instruments of change that people believe them to be,” his professor continues. “The mass hysteria and anger that they would bring would far outweigh any benefit to the populace. Better to guard them and surround them with mystery.”

“But you would consider letting students use them?” Percy asks in a voice heavy with skepticism.

Professor McGonagall acknowledges the hit with a gentle incline of her head. “I defer to the Headmaster’s judgement on that, though you undoubtedly can guess my position.”

Percy would bet the Philosopher’s Stone that Dumbledore has no intention of outfitting the entire student body with Time Turners, nor even a selective few. No, Hermione must have gotten the Time Turner because Dumbledore believed it would help Harry in some way.

Why this year? Why a Time Turner?

Something to do with Sirius Black, or something to do with Pettigrew. Unless...Percy vaguely recalls that Hermione is either a year older or a year younger than the rest of her peers. Her birthday is always celebrated in the Common Room right around the beginning of term. Perhaps Dumbledore knew that the Trio would one day be running for their lives, and he simply wanted her to reach her majority. As Percy knows, his magic recognizes his true age, even now. Dumbledore may have figured there may be a time where Hermione would need to be seventeen before the rest.

Or perhaps it falls into Dumbledore’s plans in a way that Percy was never—and will never be—privy to, as maddening as that may be.

Percy will have to wait and watch.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will include a little more of Prisoner of Azkaban. Don't worry, I haven't forgotten about Sirius Black, and neither has Percy.

REVELATIONS (4/4)

Chapter Notes

> Thank you to all that left me feedback on the last chapter! I love hearing what you guys think of Percy; some of you love him, some of you seem to strongly disagree with him, some of you wish he was staying out of the timeline, some of you wish he meddled a bit more. Some of you are as conflicted as Percy himself :)
>
> I am so sorry, this took literally forever. I will post the start of GoF ASAP. I mean it this time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER SEVEN: REVELATIONS (4/4)

1993 — 1994 (Percy is 17 & 30, Harry is 13, Ginny is 12, Tom is still 16, and Sirius Black and Severus Snape are 33)

February 1993

In early February, Pettigrew disappears.

Ron storms into the Common Room, his face blotchy and red. Hermione follows close behind, clutching Crookshanks protectively. Percy winces, anticipating an explosion; he caps his ink bottle and casts a quick wandless drying charm on his Arithmancy assignment, just in case he needs to jump into the fray.

“My cat didn’t *touch* your rat,” Hermione insists, her bushy hair crackling as her magic sparks around the curls. Percy eyes it appreciatively. He's always felt that Hermione was likely more magically powerful than she realises, given that she prefers to study magic rather than practise it. “And even if he did, that’s what cats *do*, Ron! It’s not my fault you let your rat run free!”

“You let Crookshanks run free,” Ron responds obstinately, turning on her. “Why should a cat be free but a rat has to stay locked up? Why can’t Crookshanks have a cage while Scabbers runs free around the castle?”

This is actually a somewhat valid point, and it makes Percy’s lips twitch. He bends his head over his parchment to hide his amusement, though he does not yet unscrew his ink. The timeline appears to be progressing right on schedule, despite Percy’s meddling. Percy can vividly remember how upset he was at Ron, the first time, when his younger sibling had

admitted that he'd gone and lost Percy's old pet despite receiving *strict and careful instructions* on how to best care for the rat.

After the Trio brushes by, Hermione storming angrily up the stairs after Harry fails to make peace between his two friends, Percy unobtrusively stands and slips out of the room. He's going to keep the timeline as is—he *is,* he's not stupid, he knows that the one constant they must rely on is the fact that the shade of Voldemort that is twisting its way through the world manages to solidify into a body which can be killed—he does want to know more about what Pettigrew is up to, skulking around Hogwarts. It is not impossible for someone to walk off the grounds of Hogwarts, though it is significantly harder for someone to walk on. Nothing is keeping Pettigrew here, or rather, something *must* be keeping Pettigrew here.

When he's outside, he picks a quiet spot to first cast a few Point Me spells, which inform him that both Pettigrew and Black seem to be around the edges of the castle. With a stretch of his muscles, he turns on his heel to transform into the lynx. When he had first envisioned becoming an animagus, he had believed he would spend every bit of free time exploring his new animal form. The reality is much less glamorous. To begin, Percy hardly has any free time. Furthermore, it is not as if his form is small and easy to conceal in the castle. What is he supposed to do as an animal, anyway? Percy cannot help but feel embarrassed every time he transforms and goes for a run across the grounds. It seems *childish*, in a way, to indulge his desire to sprint around and bat at the butterflies and roll around in the grass, and he'd hate to be caught doing it.

He judges that neither Pettigrew nor Black are likely up to date on their knowledge of the Forest's creatures, however, and so he meanders his way across the grounds, secure in the padding of his four paws. Being a lynx *is* rather relaxing. His human problems seem just a tad remote, just a centimetre out of reach.

He smells Pettigrew hiding in the pumpkin patch, his nose wrinkling as it confronts a range of unfamiliar scents. Smelling is one thing he does not enjoy in animal form. Hagrid is, once again, implausibly growing massive crops, despite the blustery chill of the February day. If Percy's mother ever saw Hagrid's vegetable garden, she'd be after him for weeks, trying to learn his secrets.

This weekend, for instance, the patch behind Hagrid's hut is filled to the brim with large orange and red pumpkins, several vines of what looks to be English peas, and big watermelons with glossy green skin. Percy stops to sniff at the watermelons; he is a boy from a farm, after all. He can recognize good gardening when he sees it, and the lynx has less of an aversion to the grubs that may be nestled in the watermelon patch than his human form.

He is gratified to note that there is no hippogriff chained to the side of the patch. Looks like his advice to Draco paid off; after Draco dropped the class, there would be no real need for his father to continue his investigation into Hagrid. Percy is privately skeptical over Hagrid's ability to run a clean operation, but he does remember the drama of that slaughtered hippogriff and he is glad to see it avoided.

Percy catches a whiff of fear from Pettigrew as he trots by, so he veers further afield. Percy had been careful not to transform around Pettigrew, but he does not want to get *too* close to the rat. Let him be scared, hiding out in Hagrid's pumpkin patch. Not too scared; he does not

want Pettigrew to flee. Percy whines to himself and noses at a large curling vine on the edge of the forest as he thinks about Pettigrew. Clearly, the man is more scared of what is *outside* the wards, not within.

Maybe he believes Black will pounce on him the second he leaves the wards? But clearly Black can get inside the wards. In fact—Percy sniffs the air thoughtfully—there is a mangy dog smell rather close by. The Point Me *had* suggested Black was in this direction; but so close to Pettigrew?

As Percy meanders his way toward the dog smell, trying to take a circuitious route as if he were merely exploring, he wonders if the other man can smell Pettigrew. Perhaps Black knows exactly where Pettigrew is and is waiting for something? Perhaps Lupin is in on the whole plan?

In the middle of a small clearing, Percy spots a large, skinny dog, curled up in a patch of sun. Black, if that who the dog is, is gaunt, his ribs showing through the dark pelt of his animagus form. He looks up when Percy enters the clearing but does not engage, though he shifts his body protectively over the bone that he is gnawing on.

Percy feels a bit of disgust. Imagine, the heir to the Black family reduced to such indignity. It is not as if Gringotts would not allow him to order by owl; gobins are famously neutral in most wizard affairs, the second Wizarding War notwithstanding. Percy would be willing to bet that if Black wanted to, he could withdraw enough money to outfit him properly, perhaps in Hogsmeade under a false name. Percy understands wanting to avoid detection, but a man like Sirius Black should be able to evade the Ministry's inept—yes, he can admit it, inept—attempts at capture with a few identity-concealing spells or potions. A man that can achieve the animagus form would certainly be capable of changing his face to anonymity.

Black must be mad. Percy settles himself beneath a tree, curling up to watch Black, one animal to another.

Black *is* mad. A second later, Black transforms and lunges for Percy, who is only able to escape due to his enhanced animal reflexes.

He does not transform, choosing instead to growl at Black in lynx form.

"Come here, kitty," Black says, completely inaccurately. He looks even worse as a person, his hair thick and matted, his clothes torn. Percy whines in distress, and it is only partially due to the precarious position he finds himself in. Maybe Black does not know about mail order? Impossible. Does he not have a secret, Unplottable ancestral home that should, at bare minimum, contain a kitchen and a shower?

"You're one of the smart kitties, I can tell," Black croons, holding out his hand. Percy would furrow his brows if his lynx form allowed it. "You want to help me, don't you, kitty?"

Even if Percy were a cat—how could he possibly help this shell of a man?

"Can you bring me food, kitty? Can you bring me some fish, or meat? I know you can understand me. You're one of the smart ones. Are you a kneazle, little kitty?

Percy bristles at the indignity of being called *little kitty* . Lynxes look *nothing* like kneazles, pointed ears and whiskers aside. It was as if Black was calling a lion or a tiger a common house cat. Simply unforgivable.

But, Percy supposes he could bring Black some food. He does not like the crazed look in his eye, the way he carries himself as if mental strength were the only thing preventing total collapse. For Merlin's sake, his *wand* is dangling from one hand. Black is *choosing* to live like an utter madman. No adult wizard should ever look like this, even a wizard on the run.

Percy backs away slowly. Black sighs, looking sad, and then sits cross legged on the floor, looking oddly child-like. "Well, if you do get some food, bring it back here," he mumbles, clearly losing interest in Percy. He stares at his own hands instead. "Maybe when I kill him I'll starve him to death slowly. See how he likes it, the filthy little rat. I'll keep him in a cage and watch him wither and die."

Percy turns tail and runs until he is back toward the castle. Panting, he transforms back into a human. Luckily, as he practised, his wand and clothes shift with him, though he'd cast a Disillusionment charm just in case.

What *is* Black's plan? Clearly to kill Pettigrew. Clearly the man hasn't yet found the rat. How? Why not? Percy had not had any problem finding both of them. Perhaps Black's magic no longer works after being in Azkaban? And if that were the case, what brings the two together in a tangle alongside Harry and Ron, just a few months away? Is it just luck?

Luck is the enemy of the time traveller, as anyone studied in the art would be able to attest to personally. It very well may be that Percy needs to create a situation where Pettigrew and Black cross paths—but also Ron and Harry and Hermione. Not to mention, Pettigrew needs to escape, alive. As does Black.

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(Percy tries exactly once to tail Lupin around the castle. The other man catches him in an instant and keeps him under wand point until he sheepishly transforms back into his human form. Damn werewolves and their enhanced senses. Percy stutters some excuse about practising subterfuge; an odd expression of fondness crosses Lupin's face, aimed, Percy is sure, at some ghost of the past; and the Defence professor lets him go without any points lost. Still, it is overall an embarrassing encounter).

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Snape too seems very interested in the unknown series of events that catapult the Wizarding World into the next war.

“It seems as though what is important is Pettigrew flees to the Dark Lord,” Snape says, for what may be the tenth time. He taps a quill slowly across his lower lip; an oddly intimate gesture that Percy notices he slips into when he seems to be lost in thought. “Black and the children; they are merely bystanders.”

“But something must make Pettigrew flee—and be mad enough to seek out the Dark Lord,” Percy insists, also for the tenth time.

Snape shakes his head. “We cannot rely on that. If we are off by a single day; if Pettigrew makes one single decision differently; if we fail to scare him sufficiently; I fear he will never think to traverse that far. We do not know if he found the Dark Lord by chance or on purpose, nor what was necessary for him to resurrect him. I knew Pettigrew in school; that kind of advanced magic would be far out of his grasp. Likely he had an accomplice.”

Percy frowns hesitantly. “What are you suggesting, then?”

“Imperius, of course,” Snape says coolly, raising his eyes to meet Percy’s. “Your little diary still hasn’t awoken, has it? Face it, Mr. Weasley: you may have engineered the destruction of one or even two Horcruxes. My congratulations, of course, but our task is hardly finished.”

Percy purses his lips obstinately but does not engage. “I worry the Dark Lord, when he does return, will easily detect the Imperius and wonder at it.”

Snape inclines his head slightly, the only indication that Percy made a point Snape judged to be of value. “Yes; that is why we must use that to our advantage.”

“You *want* the Dark Lord to discover Pettigrew was cursed?”

“I want the Dark Lord to see it is I who cursed him.”

“Why—oh,” Percy says as it becomes clear. “Loyal Death Eater, Severus Snape.”

Snape smiles thinly. Percy rather suspects it is his turn to forcibly contain himself from engaging in a fruitless argument. “Yes.” Much is contained in that one word, and Percy resists the urge to shiver. “I have heard rumours, but I fear I cannot escape Dumbledore’s notice myself. When I discover Pettigrew, I take advantage of the situation and compel him to bring back the Dark Lord.”

“That will change the timeline, though.”

“But we risk a fair greater change. We *need* the Dark Lord to return, so that we may destroy him ourselves.”

Snape and Percy have discussed this at length, but both grudgingly agreed they cannot risk allowing the shade of the Dark Lord to exist, insubstantial as he may be. There is no guarantee he can be destroyed in that form. No, they must lure the Dark Lord back into being and then end each Horcrux in turn.

“With Harry,” Percy points out.

Snape gives a haughty sniff. This is a point of contention between the pair; Snape refuses to admit Harry is the Chosen One, despite Percy reciting the entirety of the prophecy. Percy would normally agree that Divination is a dicey business, not one to stake any lives on or anything, but at the same time, Harry had been fairly adamant that he was required to end the Dark Lord.

Snape seems to think that merely *existing* is sufficient for Harry to fulfil his role, which Percy feels must be incorrect, right?

“We should wait until June, as your memory serves,” Snape says instead. “We do not want to risk the Dark Lord returning any earlier than he did before. If we know he will try and launch an attack on the Potter boy during the Triwizard Tournament, then that provides us with an opportunity." He glowers for a prolonged second at Percy, as if Percy, of all people, is going to disagree with him. For Merlin's sake, it was Percy who made that decision, all those years ago, to keep the timeline as intact as possible until this one, crucial moment. "I will tail Pettigrew using the Map, which, I will remind you, you have not returned to me after your last pathetic attempt to steal it from me. You keep an eye on the children. We cannot risk a confrontation where we are not present.”

“Agreed,” Percy says, dispiritedly digging around for the Map. He supposes he could try and make another copy, but he isn’t sure that layering yet another anchoring spell would be effective. Not to mention, he hardly has the time.

(Oh, the halcyon days of his youth, where he could curl up in bed with a personal project).

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Percy returns from Snape’s office to find Gryffindor Tower, once again, milling about in fear.

Merlin’s beard, he swears to himself. He’d completely forgotten about Black slashing Ron’s bed curtains.

Black must not know that Pettigrew is lurking on the grounds. There’s no other reason to break into the dormitory, not unless Black is truly after Harry. That Black slashed *Ron’s* curtains, however, does make Percy believe that Pettigrew is his true target.

Really, Black is displaying an appalling lack of subtlety or control. He’s a bloody Animagus, and a wizard *with a wand;* how hard is it to sniff out one inept rat?

Percy watches Henry once again stride to the front of the crowd, struggling to control the panicked whispers springing up on all sides. Despite himself, Percy has to hide a snort, turning away to mask the unpleasant expression he is sure has crossed his face while he watched Henry. *Not as easy as it looks, is it?* Percy asks silently to Henry, who has begun to

raise his voice to keep everyone under control. Percy may never have been particularly popular, but he thinks he ought to be able to say, at least in the privacy of his own mind, that he really had been the better Head Boy.

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April 1993

The rest of spring term passes without incident. Percy installs himself close to the young Trio, ostensibly for protection, and though Ron makes more than a few pointed comments about Percy's lack of friends, Harry and Hermione are considerably warmer to him.

Even Ron lets up after Percy purchases him a set of Keeper's gloves for his birthday.

("Why Keeper?" Ron says, running his hands over the butter-soft leather of the luridly orange gloves. If Ron makes the team he can always spell them to the proper colours.

Percy shrugs. "Seems as if it would play to your strengths.")

The Trio spends most of their time whispering near the fire. Percy keeps an eye on them, just enough to notice if they try and slip out, but not close enough that it seems as though he is eavesdropping.

(He does eavesdrop, a little; mostly they complain about Malfoy and Snape, discuss Sirius Black, speak about Harry's increasingly successful attempts to conjure a Patronus. This last topic never fails to blacken Percy's mood).

Soon after Ron's birthday it is the twins'. Percy gives them both artefacts from the Prewett vault.

("I know everyone is still rather shirty with me," Percy says, looking at each in turn. "But we are family, and family means we try and preserve our heritage—*both* our heritages. Aunt Muriel says you two remind her very much of another set of twins, ones tasked with carrying on the Prewett name. She would like it very much if she could tell you about them some time."

The twins are uncharacteristically quiet).

Easter rolls around and all the Weasleys elect to stay at Hogwarts. Percy takes the week to prepare for his NEWT exams; though he is enrolled in only eleven classes, he intends to take an even thirteen exams. He'd hoped for fourteen—part of him wishes churlishly to beat Tom—but he'd not kept up with his Divination enough to try.

(Speaking of Divination, Percy has to excuse himself and laugh into his pillow when he hears of Hermione's explosion in that class. The girl has fire, he'll give her that).

Percy spends much of spring working with Snape and Myrtle, diving into Horcruxes. He also spends quite a lot of time trying, yet again, to coax Tom awake from the diary.

(And yet he is *convinced* Tom is not entirely gone. There is something lurking in the back of his mind but he does not know where it is. His mind-library is pristine, organised, and, dare he say, elegant—but there is a lurking darkness. Bookshelves in one's one mind should not cast shadows.

Sometimes he wakes in the middle of the night and his toes feel cold, as they were pressed against the castle's damp stone. Sometimes he snaps at his classmates and the words are not his. Sometimes there is an extra tremor to his fingers when he wraps them around his wand; sometimes he remembers Tom's challenge to *assert himself* and feels as though he's disappointed him. Sometimes he tries to cast his Patronus and the mist is thin and insubstantial.

But he has lost no memory, not really. Snape examines his mind and finds nothing; he watches him on the Map and assures him he does not leave his dormitory at night. *It's all in your head,* says Snape. *We need you to be focused, Mr. Weasley. Stop conjuring ghosts.*

Is that what he is doing?)

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Giving up the diary as lost had not been particularly *easy* for Percy, which is perhaps why he becomes fascinated with the diadem, researching its history in great depth, and even sketching it in as much detail as he can. Toward the end of April, he even feels brave enough to suggest to Snape that they should try actually wearing the damn thing.

Snape does not even look up from his scribbling. "No."

"The diary is not responding; it likely is destroyed," concedes Percy, though he is not entirely convinced. "The diadem is likely dead as well. When Tom and I encountered it, we triggered its awakening merely with touch; it is possible that now we need to interact with it as it expects."

Snape sets down his quill and looks tiredly at Percy. "And if the diadem is not destroyed?"

"Remove it from my person at once?" quips Percy.

"We do not know what other protections Lady Ravenclaw set on the diadem," Snape says, not engaging with Percy's attempt at humour. "Everything about the diadem is a mystery."

"We need to take the risk," Percy protests. "It might even give us wisdom."

"Ah, this is what this is about," Snape drawls insultingly. "You wish to be the one who gains wisdom from the diadem. You think you are worthy, Percy Weasley?"

Percy shakes his head, his ears flaming slightly. “No, but I think—I think the Grey Lady will help me.”

(Percy has a faint memory of the Grey Lady, the coolness of her touch, as snow falls around his face and he struggles to breathe. Something about *protection.* Something about a mutual recognition of the other, a shared purpose).

“I can summon her,” Myrtle pipes up from the corner. She looks at Snape’s face assessingly —Percy squashes a frisson of irritation that she does not look to *him*—and then dives through the floor.

“You may die for this,” Snape says conversationally. But since he returns to his writing, Percy does not take that to mean that Snape is as worried as he seems.

Percy does not respond. He’s frustrated that the diary isn’t responding, that Tom has abandoned him. If they are to write off both Horcruxes then he wishes to be certain.

And yes, perhaps he wishes for wisdom, perhaps he hopes to reap a reward for finding the lost diadem of Lady Ravenclaw. Snape never would have the chance to examine it if it were not for Percy. (For Tom).

Myrtle and the Grey Lady drift through the wall serenely. Myrtle’s eyes are wide and childish behind her glasses; compared to her, the Grey Lady looks impossibly refined.

“Have you succeeded, young Weasley?” The Grey Lady asks, not sparing a look for Snape.

Percy fights the urge to sweep a bow, instead levitating the diadem carefully so that it is closer to her line of sight. “We believe the Horcrux may be gone; I wish to wear the diadem, to see if that triggers action.”

The Grey Lady arches an eyebrow. “And to receive wisdom, I imagine.”

Snape snorts quietly from behind Percy. Percy ignores it. “Will I come to harm, if I wear the diadem?”

The Grey Lady reaches out a ghostly hand and trails it along the jewels adorning the top of the diadem. She closes her eyes, as if she can actually sense the diadem, as if she can exert an influence on the physical world. (And why not? Myrtle is adept at bursting pipes; why would the Grey Lady not be able to interact with her mother’s diadem?)

“I believe the diadem itself will not harm you,” says the ghost. “I cannot speak for what else it may contain.”

Percy nods, trembling slightly, and reaches out a hand for the diadem. Before he can grasp it, however, Snape hits him with several rapid diagnostic charms and what Percy believes is a strong charm of protection.

“Data,” he says, when Percy looks at him questioningly. “We likely will have to risk multiple controlled exposure to the Horcrux, and we do not know how the Horcrux will corrupt or

manifest the diadem's true powers. From my research, the diadem merely enhances the wisdom of the wearer; that is to say, it does not necessarily bestow any *new* intelligence."

They look at the Grey Lady, who floats, silently, neither confirming nor denying Snape's theory.

"I would imagine that this version of—of Tom was already wise," Percy continues, though he cannot help but feel that his words are a tremendous understatement. "I shudder to think what the Horcrux knows."

"Providing the Horcrux with knowledge about you could be dangerous."

"And providing knowledge about you would not be?" Percy says with a raised eyebrow. "Unless we wish to kidnap and Obliviate random test subjects, we'll have to eventually take the risk. I'd rather do it earlier rather than later."

After a second, in which Percy belatedly worries Snape will suggest kidnapping some random participants in their trial, Snape gives a terse nod. Percy had provided Snape with extensive documentation of the timeline, in addition to some key memories in bottles, though after Snape's relentless interrogations, there is not much that Snape does not yet know. The only secrets Percy still has are of this timeline. It was surprising how cathartic the act of telling Snape everything had been for Percy.

Percy takes the diadem gingerly from where it is floating in the air and settles it on his head. It is cool, uncomfortably so, and for a second Percy thinks nothing will happen at all, and then he sees his father twist out of the diadem. But it is not his father as he knows him, stooped and weary and shabby; the mist condensed into a version of his father that is strong and tall, his eyes glittering fiercely behind his glasses. This version of his father looks very much like Percy, and the experience is rather disconcerting.

"Son," says his father, and the voice too is just a shade away from real.

When the Horcrux does not say anything further, Percy exchanges a confused look with Snape, and then he speaks. "Father. Why are you here?"

"In truth I do not know," says Arthur, the formal words odd from his father's mouth. "I had thought once that you would be an heir of whom I could be proud. I know better, now."

Percy clenches his jaw and then forces himself not to react. "Tom," he tries instead, looking into his father's eyes. "Tom, I want to speak to you."

Arthur laughs, and the sound is grating to Percy's ears. "Why would you believe Tom wants to speak to you?"

"Tom, I need to speak to you. It's important," pleads Percy. "We both know that these—these *figures*, they are but misdirection."

"Pathetic," his father breathes. "Why you believe yourself worthy of his attention—of mine—is unfathomable."

“Shut up,” Percy snaps, his face twisting in anger. “Tom, I want to speak to you *now*.”

“Oh, Percy,” Arthur breathes pityingly. “You never learn, do you? Least respected, least valued, least important. You are the heir to nothing, my boy, and it would serve you better to learn that quickly.”

Arthur begins to laugh, and Percy whips out his wand, incensed. A second later he staggers back, the tight feeling in his chest beginning to loosen as Snape levitates the diadem off of his head.

Percy doesn’t say anything as Snape locks the diadem back in the desk, needing all of the time he can to recover from the intense surge of hatred toward his father that the Horcrux’s words had elicited. The entire encounter had been under a minute or two total; Percy had switched from confusion to anger so quickly that his head had begun to throb with the intensity of his sudden change in disposition.

The Grey Lady speaks up quietly. “I believe the diadem will never work again,” she says, and the raw loss in her voice is enough to embarrass Percy. “Destroy it, Mr. Weasley. Destroy it now.”

Snape shakes his head, continuing to examine the diadem. “We do not know how, my lady, but rest assured we will one day,” he says smoothly. “We thank you for your assistance.”

This is a clear dismissal, and the ghost disappears the way she came without another word. A silence follows her departure, the short encounter with the Horcrux leaving them all rattled.

The diadem secured, Snape turns to Percy and raises a silent eyebrow, a clear admonishment at Percy’s obvious lack of control. Percy flushes angrily. “It wanted to make me angry,” he says in his defence.

“Do you believe your father is not proud of you?” Snape says.

Percy splutters uncomfortably and takes another step back unconsciously. “I’m sorry?”

“The Horcrux,” Snape prompts, as if Percy is being intentionally slow. “It took the form of your father, but a version of your father that is dismissive of you. Is that a fear of yours?”

“Of course not.”

“Weasley, do not mistake my motives in asking this question,” snaps Snape, his voice suddenly terse. “I care not for your personal drama, nor your insipid little feelings. We must document each of these encounters. Why did the Horcrux take this form? Why a version of your father much wealthier than the Arthur I know? Why did he speak to you with such disdain?”

(Myrtle, eyes flicking between the two, slowly and silently fades away. Neither wizard notices her leaving).

“I obviously don’t care if my father is proud of me,” says Percy irritatedly, his voice rising despite himself. “I’m here for one reason, Snape. My father can’t hope to understand that.”

“But you want him to. You wish your father was wealthier, more respectable, but you fear that if he was then he would have no interest in you.”

Percy takes another step back, his hand curling around his wand. Perhaps it is the brush with the Horcrux, or perhaps it is the uncomfortable feeling of having another person focus his insight on him for the first time in nearly a decade, but Percy cannot fight the lick of panic and irritation that is building inside his stomach. He knows Snape is probably right—he knows that he should at least try to analyse what he is feeling—but his chest is tight, and his throat is tight, and he cannot bring himself to calm down. “You’re reaching,” he says instead. “I have to go.”

“Mr. Weasley—” Snape begins to say, voice raised.

“Percy,” he says again, and then darts through the door before Snape can stop him.

Outside, he takes two rapid left turns and then stops against one of the enchanted windows that looks out over the Great Lake. What is *wrong* with him? Snape had not even said anything particularly cutting, or particularly cruel, but Percy is feeling as if Snape had looked deeply into his soul and seen something too intimate to explain.

It’s the Horcrux, he tells himself, shaking his head. *It makes me feel vulnerable.*

He’ll have to apologise to Snape at some point, he knows, but for this evening all he can do is set his embarrassment aside for the time being.

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Percy brings Black a care package the next day, feeling a bit guilty that he’d forgotten about the man in all of the fuss of the last few weeks. Mimsy happily packs him some nutritious food, including several types of fruits and vegetables to hopefully stave off scurvy, and even includes a magical razor and soap without question.

He debates as to the method of delivery but finally just disillusions himself to leave it in the clearing. Even Black would find a lynx pushing a full package of supplies suspicious.

Then he does transform into his form, trotting toward the lake as he mulls over his behaviour to Snape. *Why* had the Horcrux wanted to incite anger? Percy would have guessed it would want to slyly invite the wearer in, same as the diary. Perhaps Tom had been more angry when he created it, or he feared an opponent wearing the diadem for too long and gaining wisdom of their own. Perhaps the diadem *feeds* off of the wearer’s anger.

He also does not understand why that surge of anger rattled him so. Percy is familiar with anger, he thinks to himself as he trots across the grounds. Why would this be any different?

Perhaps it is just that his Tom is dead, or whatever passes for death when one is a Horcrux. Percy knows that Tom becomes undeniably evil, but here, alone in his head, he mourns the

boy that he improbably got to know over the last two years. The abrupt conclusion to his relationship with Tom is jarring, to say the least, and he wishes he would have known what Tom's reaction would be to the other Horcrux.

It *is* interesting to think that the Horcruxes would want to destroy each other. Admittedly his sample size is two, but Percy wonders if each Horcrux represents a different part of his soul. The diary by definition is Tom at his most intimate, its pages nothing more than a schoolboy wishing to remain forever at school. The diadem could be wisdom; certainly the shadowy figures of Dumbledore and Fred were knowledgeable, if not wise.

But is it because of the age that Tom was when he created the Horcrux? Perhaps like ghosts, the portion of the soul ripped from the whole is frozen at that point in time, never to develop further. Or is it the medium? Had the Horcrux merely corrupted the powers of the diadem?

Percy knows from his research that the cup provides unlimited or magic sustenance, depending on the legend. The locket is an amulet of protection; the sword is an instrument of destruction. What would they look like, corrupted by the Horcrux?

He whines to himself and breaks into a run, his four legs bounding in harmony across the grounds. His chest burns with the exertion, but whereas exercising in his human form makes him feel weak, the effort of maintaining his place makes him feel strong in this form.

His actions killed Tom that night—and removed their best chance for success at the same time. How are they meant to communicate with the diadem when it seems to communicate through taunts and barbs aimed at whatever part of you is most vulnerable?

They can assume the other Founder's Artefacts may be Horcruxes, but they don't know that. They can wait for Dumbledore but that could take years. They *need* Tom.

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Percy would like to avoid Snape forever, but he is pragmatic enough to know that he must seek the other man out and apologise. The knowledge makes it no easier to stand in front of Snape’s desk, hands clasped behind his back, and muster up the bravery to say, “Professor—Severus. I wanted to apologise for my behaviour during our previous meeting. I spoke rudely to you and without cause.”

Percy catches the look of surprise on Snape’s face before it flickers away into his normal inscrutable glare. “The Horcrux is more potent than we had first believed,” Snape says, which almost sounds like he is accepting Percy’s apology, or at the very least excusing his behaviour.

“Perhaps at first, but I think...well, I know that I was embarrassed at your insight,” Percy says. His cheeks are burning, but he continues to speak. It is important to him, for some reason, that Snape respects him, properly, and as an adult rather than a child. “You were

correct about my feelings toward my father, and you were correct to verify those feelings with me. I thank you for it."

Snape does not say anything in reply—but he holds Percy's gaze for a long second and then inclines his head slowly, which to Percy's surprise feels more meaningful than a reply would have been.

"Perhaps we should swear a vow," Percy suggests. He quirks his lips in an attempt at humour. "Nothing shall pass these walls. At least I may be less liable to snap at you out of embarrassment."

Somehow, they end up swearing it: that neither shall reveal personal details about the other or about their shared mission, unless the other person gives them permission or the war could be considered over. Percy had always known that Snape would trap him into a vow; he'd been expecting it ever since he'd revealed the truth to Snape originally and let Snape know, in return, that Percy knew some of the story of Lily Evans. The surprise here is that Snape swears the vow back. Something about that feels meaningful. Something about that is to be treasured later, in bed, the warm feeling of mutual respect so unexpected from Severus Snape, and yet so strangely important to him.

"I believe it is my turn," says Snape, without a smile, but nevertheless with a glimpse of humour, after the vows have been sworn and the charged moment faded. As before, he turns to the desk and levitates the diadem without touching it. But this time, he steels himself and reaches for the diadem, setting it on top of his dark, greasy hair.

The smoke condenses into Lily. Percy tenses instinctively, a dark wave of anger rolling into the room, the air changing as tangibly as if the sky outside had suddenly turned grey.

A muscle jumps in Snape's cheek, but he does not otherwise react to Lily materialising in front of him. She is stunningly beautiful; people had often said that Ginny is reminiscent of Lily, but the only similarity seems to be their bright red hair. Lily is tall, with delicate features, whereas Ginny has the sturdier, muscular build of a professional athlete. Her green eyes, even in this murky form, are exactly Harry's. Even for a man with six siblings, the similarity between Harry and Lily in this way is striking, and Percy understands suddenly why so many people bring it up when they see Harry for the first time. Four of the seven Weasley children have their mother's brown eyes—Ron, Charlie, and Bill with their father's blue—but none of them are so similar that an outsider would notice at first glance.

"Severus," says Lily, and her voice is a gust of sadness and longing. "Severus, I have missed you."

Snape swallows roughly. It is a mark of how much this interaction is costing Snape that he is so openly distressed. Percy eyes him and fingers his wand, ready with the air-thinning spell in case of errant Fiendfyre.

But Snape is not angry. In this moment he is sad, incredibly sad, so sad that Percy struggles to think of a more appropriate word. His sorrow, or what Percy can glimpse of it, is so clearly deep and still, like the ocean on a windless night, that to compare it to Percy's grief over losing Fred would be an insult. Maybe George would understand a sadness like this, but

Percy is nearly too ashamed to admit to himself that he never wants to similarly comprehend the depths of Snape's emotions.

"Lily," says Snape, and the word seems to encompass an entire world. "Help me."

These three words seem almost too much for Snape to bear. Percy has no doubt that if he had not sworn the vow just moments prior, Snape would have not allowed him to witness this. Even so, Snape must believe the threat of the Horcrux truly dangerous to let Percy to remain. Percy remembers how vulnerable he had felt, how angry, how embarrassed, just to know that Snape knew some of his insecurities around his father, and cannot help but be ashamed that Snape must reveal himself at all.

Lily looks at Snape sorrowfully. "I cannot help you, Severus," she whispers. "You know why."

Though he'd insinuated otherwise to Snape, Percy does not actually know the particulars of this story. He knows Snape had loved Lily—loved her enough to guard her son in secret for years. But this sorrow extends beyond merely the grief of losing a loved one.

Severus' nostrils flare just slightly, but his voice is steady when he responds, "You must. I need to know where they are, Lily."

"To destroy them, or to use them?" Lily breathes, shimmering in the air. "You murdered me, Severus Snape. You murdered my husband and you would have murdered my son. What need do you have for the others?"

As the observer, this time, Percy can observe how stilted some of the words are from the Horcrux, how it admits to knowledge of the other Horcruxes without hesitation. For all that the Horcrux is embedded into Ravenclaw's famous diadem, it seems less sophisticated than the diary, which was an unadulterated glimpse into the teenaged Tom's mind. Perhaps because the diadem was made later, and thus contains less of Tom's soul? Or perhaps the natural magic of Ravenclaw's diadem is fighting with the Horcrux, rendering it less powerful?

"I am sorry," Snape says, so quietly that Percy almost does not hear the words. He pauses and then asks, with difficulty, "You will not help me?"

"I never loved you," Lily says in response. Her tone is harsher, now, and less like what Percy imagines Lily Evans actually sounded like. "I pitied you. Poor, ugly Severus Snape and his little Death Eater friends. I was relieved when I no longer had you tagging at my heels."

Percy sucks in a breath, but this does not seem to affect Snape, who smiles without humour. "It certainly made it easier for you to marry Potter."

"James was everything you were not," Lily says, her red lips curving into a triumphant smile. "Handsome, wealthy, athletic, powerful. I would have chosen him even if we had remained friends, Severus. You murdered him out of your jealousy, but even if he were dead, I would not have chosen you."

Snape shakes his head, a curious smile on his lips. “I am sorry, Lily,” he says once more, and then without hesitation he lifts the diadem from his head and sets it on his desk. After a few more spells, he locks it away securely.

Percy is very silent. Snape’s sorrow has receded, almost visibly so, and instead he seems only tired. Certainly he is not as angry as Percy had been, nor as embarrassed, considering the scene that Percy just witnessed.

“Why—” Percy starts and then subsides.

Snape gives him a look that is suddenly searing in its resignation. “The Horcrux cannot say anything I have not already thought,” he says by way of explanation. “I do not believe our attempts to convince the Horcrux to help us will be of any use. Perhaps we can threaten it, or otherwise reveal the Dark Lord within, but our entreaties do nothing save embarrass us both.”

Percy nods hastily. He is thankful the Horcrux only showed his father, rather than Fred, or his mother, or even Penny.

Over the next few weeks, they try wearing the diadem a few times more. For several times in a row, it takes the form of Dumbledore, wearing a face of condescending disappointment, similar for both Percy and Snape. Even James Potter appears once, looking shockingly like an older Harry.

Percy only has a chance to gape at his ghostly form before Snape wrenches off the diadem, his face thunderous. Only some quick thinking by Percy saves the Horcrux from harm this time; he does employ the same spell McGonagall once used to quell his Fiendfyre, and it is only successful because Percy manages the spell before Snape’s Fiendfyre even takes form. Snape turns on him, towering in his anger, and Percy takes the diadem and flees.

Percy prudently avoids Snape for a few weeks after that, the diadem kept securely in his second trunk. The professor is noticeably furious in the days that follow; Gryffindor loses an unprecedented amount of points, and poor Harry finds himself in detention for three consecutive weeks after arriving late to one lesson.

(To Percy’s interest, he sees Lupin watching Snape during this time, not warily like the other professors, but very intently. Perhaps he thinks Snape’s anger is directed at Sirius Black. Percy longs to spy but does not want to risk being caught).

He finally makes up his mind about his plans for next year, submitting the application to serve as Crouch’s personal assistant. He tells McGonagall one day toward the end of May. With Snape and Myrtle in the castle, he feels as if he need not remain too, even though he longs to do so. They will need a spy in the Ministry, and Percy cannot risk telling his secret to anyone else.

“I am not abandoning this,” he says, laying his hand on his leather bound notebook, tracing the gold vines embossing the spine.

She nods slowly. “See that you don’t, Mr. Weasley.”

Harry is twelve; in five short years, if Percy interferes no further, he *should* be defeating the Dark Lord right about now.

“I’ll be back within half a decade,” he promises, thinking of that unseasonably warm day when Fred falls to his death.

Professor McGonagall smiles at this. “Strong words for one without two decades to his name,” she says teasingly.

Over three, but she does not need to know that. He shrugs uncomfortably. “My family—” he begins, and then falters. “My parents—”

“Did you know I am a halfblood, Mr. Weasley?”

He blinks at her. “No, Professor.”

“To make matters worse, my father was a Muggle,” she says dryly. “In those days, if the mother was a Muggle, it was less egregious. Plenty a wizard fell for a pretty village girl. But a Muggle *father*, well, that sullied the witch forever.”

Percy doesn’t say anything, sensing she is not finished with her story.

“My mother had given up her magic until I came along. No need for it; she was never a particularly good witch, and she was relatively minor and unimportant in society, and she loved my father dearly. My birth must have shocked them both; I’ve always a talent for wandless magic, even from the crib.” McGonagall smiles conspiratorially, and Percy can suddenly see her, eleven years old, bold and mischievous. "When I came to Hogwarts, I was the best, Mr. Weasley—or something close to it. Nobody sneered at me, let me tell you."

Percy looks at McGonagall, thinking of arenas, thinking of bravery.

"I almost married a Muggle," she continues, fluttering her hand as if to encompass the entire mess that must have been. "Needless to say, I chose my magic over him, and it is a decision I have defended to myself to this day."

"Professor…" Percy starts without any of the slightest idea what he's asking.

"I spent two years in the Ministry trying to prove myself," she continues, as if she didn't hear. "Prove I was right to be a witch, prove I could be better than all of those smart young wealthy boys who were too afraid to marry me. And then do you know what I realised, Mr. Weasley?"

"You preferred Hogwarts?"

Professor McGonagall leans forward, her eyes glinting. "The only way to win the war I wanted to win was to be here," she breathes, sending chills down his spine. "I am not a perfect professor, Mr. Weasley, nor a perfect Head of House—but I hope my House supports its students. I hope I help my students discover who they want to become. Nearly every single witch or wizard, pureblood or Muggleborn or something in between, has passed through my classroom for the last fifty years.

"An opportunity," Percy completes, seeing his professor as if for the first time. True, he was not always happy in Gryffindor—but had she not appointed him Prefect and Head Boy in the timeline where he clung desperately to those accolades? Had she not recognized this time how much he would thrive with her tutelage? Did she not support Oliver's unorthodox captaincy of the Quidditch team, did she not defend Mariana when her mother wrote to question her child's poor grades, did she not give every student a fair chance to prove themselves in her classroom?

No, Professor McGonagall is not perfect, but Percy can appreciate her all the same.

"Are you suggesting I do the same?"

Professor McGonagall shakes her head, and something inside him is simultaneously relieved and disappointed. "Perhaps, perhaps not," she says. "I have a few years of teaching still in me. But my point is that you must know what battle you are trying to win—then you may choose how to win it. The obvious choice, the choice you make merely to prove something to someone, the choice that seems inevitable...these may be merely secondary to the choice you have yet to consider. I admit I hope you return here, to scholarship and perhaps to teaching, but all I ask is that you ask yourself during these next few years what it is that makes you feel powerful, what it is that makes you want to fight for your right to belong somewhere."

Percy has yet another urge to blurt everything out, but he restrains himself with difficulty. "There may be a day, Professor, where I come to you with a rather unbelievable story," he says instead, meeting her eyes solidly. "Will you promise me that no matter when that is, no matter what you may think of me, that you will allow me the opportunity to share it with you?"

Her eyes narrow fractionally. If it were Snape, Percy would already be feeling the pressure of his mind penetrating Percy's. Since it's McGonagall, however, she only employs the considerable weapon of her undivided attention before nodding briskly. "I hope you do, Mr. Weasley. I promise you that if you come to me, I shall listen."

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June 1993

Snape and Percy had planned their abduction of Pettigrew for the second weekend in June, right after exams. Instead, events come to a head seven days prior.

It begins with Ron and Hermione having a screaming match in the Common Room.

("—your utter disregard for the rules—"

"—your lack of feelings and *emotion*—")

Harry, poor Harry, steps bravely between them and suggests they all go down for a visit to Hagrid. Ron turns on him, face ugly, and Harry takes a step back as if physically struck.

Percy, fool as he is, intervenes, not least because the other seventh years are stirring, angry at the disruption this close to their final NEWT examinations.

("Ron, apologise to Harry at once."

"You're not Mum, Percy. Why don't you ever just *stay out of it*?"

"Harry is your best friend and you'll regret this, Ronald. Apologise, *now*.")

Ron storms from the Common Room; Harry hurries after him; and Hermione, slamming her books down in a huff of annoyance, looks irritatedly around her before relunctantly following suit.

("He's really not always like this, Hermione."

"He's always like this to *me*.")

Percy, critically, does not follow.

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In fact, Percy stays put in the Common Room for a few more hours, enjoying the sounds of quills scratching across paper as even the chaotic wild energy of Gryffindor Tower is channelled into frantic exam review. Percy spends the majority of his time alone, and often he prefers it like that, but sometimes he has to admit there is something *pleasant* about being around the ambient sounds of other humans…as long as they do not disturb him.

So he startles quite significantly when Nearly Headless Nick appears in the middle of the table, his head spearing the sheaf of notes Percy had been accumulating on self-transfiguration.

“Sir Nicholas!” Percy gasps, rocking backward in his chair, a great gob of ink smearing over his carefully transcribed notes of McGonagall’s last lecture.

Some of the other Gryffindors look up, but seeing that it is only their house ghost choosing an unfortunate place to materialise, return to their notes all the more frantically.

“My apologies, dear boy,” chuckles the ghost, adjusting his head to more securely attach to his pearly neck. “Myrtle has a message for you—she says that the wormwood potion you were tending for Professor Snape in his absence has boiled over, and you ought to hurry if you want to revive it before the professor returns.”

For a second, Percy just stares, perplexed, at the ghost. A *wormwood* potion? Wormwood is an ingredient in many other potions, but Percy cannot think of what Myrtle may be referring to, least of all because Percy is not tending to any potion, and why would Snape be absent?

Then, realisation dawns, and Percy swears to himself as he takes a second to bundle all of his notes together and banish them back to the dormitory. Not wormwood, but Worm*tail*.

The Trio *has* been gone for quite some time.

More Gryffindors look up this time as Percy makes his frantic way across the Common Room, navigating around piles of parchment and squishy red chairs with barely any margin for error. Alexander, in the chair closest to the door, even wishes him luck and informs him that they will have a solemn funeral for him—after the NEWTs—if Snape offs him in his ire.

"Thanks," grunts Percy and dives through the portrait hole, transforming into the lynx on the other end and taking off in a sprint to Snape's office.

The confrontation must have happened; somehow, the Trio's arguments must have set it off. Maybe Hermione finally thought to try a *Point Me* or an *Accio* to fetch Scabbers, and Sirius Black came out of hiding. Maybe Black got tired of waiting and pounced on Ron. But why would Snape have been involved—and why would he not have alerted Percy himself?

When he arrives at Snape's office, panting even in lynx form, Myrtle and the Map are waiting for him.

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"*Finally*," Myrtle says as Percy pads inside and then transforms back into his wizard self.

"What," he gasps at her, a bit disgusted by how sweaty he is even after the transformation. By Merlin, he's really got to exercise regularly, one of these days.

Myrtle gestures toward the Map. They had agreed that among the three of them, one of them would be monitoring the Map at all times, at least so they could be somewhat forwarned if either Pettigrew or Black acted unexpectedly. "I came to see what Professor Snape was doing, and to take over watching the Map," she explains, "since *you* had to study for the NEWTs—even though we both know you're going to pass—and I found the Map open on his desk, but the office empty."

Percy performs a quick Scourgify on his body, wincing at the feeling of the spell wiping a rough cloth against his skin and robes, and then takes a look at the Map.

It does not take him very long to see a rather upsetting confluence of dots, out at the very edge of the Map near the Whomping Willow: Snape, Lupin, Black, Pettigrew, and the three infernal teenagers who are the bane of Percy's existence.

Why had Snape not *alerted* him? Percy is surprised by how hurt he feels by the thought.

“He must have felt he had to run,” Myrtle says, divining the direction of his thoughts with surprising accuracy. “He left the Map out for you, Percy.”

Percy grimances but has to admit that Myrtle is probably right. Snape is not the type to leave something like the Map out without a reason.

Then Myrtle gasps, and Percy feels her shock like a mist of very fine droplets of water. “Wait, Percy, it’s you,” she says, and Percy follows her translucent finger to see his own name moving across the grounds.

“What?” Percy says out loud, watching as the dots perform an intricate dance that he cannot understand. The Trio begins to run back to the castle, panicked, if the speed of their dots moving is any indication; Black, for some reason, heads off into the forest, and Lupin follows him; and Snape begins to follow the Trio closely on their heels, even as Pettigrew’s dot makes a break for it and begins sprinting toward Hagrid’s hut, Percy close behind.

“I don’t understand,” says Myrtle quietly. They watch as Percy follows Pettigrew off the boundaries of the Map, as Percy has certainly never gone to that section of the Forbidden Forest before, and certainly has no intention of it.

And then Percy sees something which clarifies and obscutates the matter even further: Harry, Ron, and Hermione are also on the boundaries of the Map, heading toward the Great Lake, their dots on the Map twice each, and Percy suddenly realises what part of the puzzle he is missing.

“It’s the Time Turner,” he breathes, surprised.

“What?”

“Hermione has a Time Turner.”

Myrtle flies through him and he shivers at the intrusion. “Hermione has a *Time Turner* and you didn’t tell me?”

“I forgot to mention it,” Percy says honestly. He’d watched her for a few weeks, of course, but it seemed fairly obvious that Hermione was only using the thing to *go to her classes*. His classmates might tease him about being a swot, but he only maintains that fiction to deflect interest into his extracurricular activities. Hermione takes it to another level. “I meant to bring it up, but something else kept getting in the way.”

“So you must have gone through time too,” Myrtle says, her mind leaping ahead. “But Percy —isn’t that incredibly dangerous? You know, since you’ve already…”

Percy nods to himself as she trails off. It *could* be incredibly dangerous, but clearly he seems to be doing just fine, given that he saw his dot moving around on the Map. “Pettigrew must have escaped; maybe in rat form,” he says, thinking out loud. “Maybe that’s why Lupin and Black ran into the forest, to find him. They all split up.”

But none of them thought to use a *Point Me* charm?

"I must somehow get the Time Turner from Hermione, since I can see that they aren't going to catch Pettigrew," Percy continues, mostly to himself. "We know that the Time Turner can go back seven hours, so I have…six, maybe five, hours to get the Time Turner from Hermione and use it. But they are *also* using it, so I need to use it after they have already returned."

"I don't know," Myrtle says doubtfully. "That seems awfully risky, Percy."

"I think it's what we have to do," Percy insists, looking up from the Map to meet Myrtle in the eyes. "Look, Pettigrew *has* to go to the Dark Lord, and he *has* to bring him back, otherwise nothing we've done has been for anything. I can't keep waiting for the timeline to develop, Myrtle. Clearly we've changed it already. We have to make sure this, at least, goes as scheduled."

"What if Pettigrew sees you, and wonders why a Weasley is chasing him?" Myrtle counters. "And wasn't the plan for *Snape* to Imperius him? Are you going to do it if he doesn't come?"

"He'll come," says Percy with conviction. "Look, we have to wait for the Trio to come back from *their* little adventure. We know the Time Turner can't be used more than once by the same person in the same timeline; that's basic time magic theory. If we watch the Map, we'll know what's going to happen, and then it'll be easy to do it again."

Myrtle shakes her head, her long hair gleaming in the dark of Snape's office. "Just because you know something is going to happen doesn't mean it'll be *easy*."

"That much I already know, Myrtle," he snaps back, and they subside into a tense silence as they watch the Map carefully for clues.

It is nearly an hour later that the next stage of the drama seems to unfold. Percy sits up straight, alerting Myrtle, who had lost interest in watching Black and Lupin chase each other around the Forest. Lupin begins careening intentionally toward the castle, where Snape and the Trio had been standing for several minutes—Percy imagines Snape's castigation of the three teenagers and feels a little sorry for them—with Black hot on his heels. Percy watches, fascinated, as Lupin, Black and Snape circle each other…duelling, perhaps? Then Lupin breaks away, running back toward the Forest.

Black and Snape's dots are very close together, almost overlapping, and then to Percy's bewilderment, he sees Cornelius Fudge begin to walk down with Albus Dumbledore. Black, understandably, seems to flee…but the Trio follows him.

Percy shakes his head. "What is *happening?"*

"I think Fudge must have been alerted that Black is here," Myrtle says slowly. "The Trio must be trying to help him escape."

"And *Snape* is covering their tracks?"

It doesn't make sense.

The rest of it seems to unfold very quickly. Harry, Ron, and Hermione's dots—both of them—almost seem to converge at the Great Lake, one set of the teenagers with Black, another set seemingly hiding in the copse of trees a few metres away. Snape, Fudge, and Dumbledore seem to be conversing, and then Fudge and Dumbledore break off toward the Shrieking Shack, and Snape seems to be making his way toward the Great Lake, before he abruptly changes direction and begins heading toward where Percy and Pettigrew had last been.

Percy keeps watching. Both sets of the Trio seems to linger, together, with Black near the Lake. Are they *communicating?* Surely Hermione would know that was strictly forbidden. They linger there until Percy and Snape appear as well, and then for some reason one set of the Trio disappears one by one, then Percy and Snape begin to head back to the castle together. Then, after a few minutes the other Trio leaves Black, who begins to make his way toward the Quidditch Pitch, of all places.

"That made absolutely no sense," Myrtle says into the quiet.

Percy nods in agreement, but then adds, "It doesn't *really* matter for me, though, does it."

"What do you mean?"

Percy checks his watch and says, "Well, we know at 10:43 in the evening, Snape is trying to find me, and presumably Pettigrew. We know that I appear on the Map at 7:45. I don't think I care very much about what is happening with Black and the Trio…we just need to get to Pettigrew, which means that by 7:45 I need to be out on the grounds, catching him."

"That was very odd, Percy," Myrtle says unnecessarily, gesturing at the Map. "I don't like this at all. I don't think you should go."

"I already have, Myrtle," Percy points out, feeling a flash of impatience. "I already have, so now we just have to figure out how I've done it. We need to get to the Time Turner."

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In a way, the surety that underlies Percy's next few actions is familiar. He misses it in a nostalgic sort of way, remembering the conviction he'd had in his actions those first few years in his new life, the sense that everything was proceeding on plan, of course, because it had already, and all he had to do to ensure the timeline was stable was to stay out of the way.

Now, it does not take a Seer—or a time traveller—to know that Percy has irrevocably changed the timeline. Percy no longer feels the satisfaction of pieces falling into place, but rather the constant pressure of uncertainty pricking the skin around his shoulders and upsetting his stomach. (Percy has not been able to eat anything more than half a plate of food

for many weeks). The only recourse he has is to hope, over and over again, that he is not causing waves large enough to drown him and the rest of the world besides.

So it is a *relief* to feel once again like his actions are preordained. It is a relief to wait by the girls' dormitory, ostensibly waiting for his sister, until Hermione brushes by him and heads directly to the bathrooms. It is a relief to loiter there unobtrusively until he feels Myrtle's cold form brush by him; confirmation that Hermione is showering off the remnants of the stressful day, as he had thought she might, thereby leaving the Time Turner open to theft. This time, he does not bother with an Imperius; his Summoning Charm is so precise that the Time Turner whistles through the air and smacks into his palm.

It is a relief to feel the gleaming medal, to marvel at the intricate gears. It is a bit less of a relief to sneak off with it, and put its gold chain over his head, and take a second to hope that he is not being impulsive.

(He really…ought to *not* go back in time. He knows the theory; he knows that to go back in time twice concurrently is incredibly dangerous, and at times irreversible. But he tells himself that the ritual he chose did not exactly throw him back in time, not in the same way, but rather created an alternate universe where he now lives. It should be fine).

"Percy, close your eyes," Myrtle says just as he is about to spin the delicate little dial. "*Now.*"

The command in her voice shocks him, and his eyes flutter shut of his own accord. A second later, he feels a solid body brush past him, and to his utter surprise—his heart jumps a little in his chest—he recognises the scent of pine soap that he has favoured the last few years in Hogwarts.

It is—him?

Percy longs to open his eyes, but Myrtle hovers directly in front of him, casting a cool breeze on his face, and he knows not to risk it. To see your future self is *expressly* forbidden, though he desperately wishes he could ask the Percy of seven hours hence whether everything goes as planned.

That Percy does not say anything, either. Percy takes that to be a good sign. He'd warn himself, damn the consequences, if there was death or destruction ahead, wouldn't he?

He hears a faint buzzing fill his ears, and the indignity that his own self cast a privacy ward to keep him out of the conversation nearly makes him open his eyes. Then the sensation falls away, and Myrtle says, her voice subdued, "He's gone."

They are alone in the corridor.

"What did he say?" Percy says urgently, turning on the ghost.

She squints at him, her glasses gleaming, and then says deliberately, "I think you ought to go in your form."

“I can’t do magic in my form,” he points out slowly, his mind whirring over the implication that he had told Myrtle to tell him that he ought to be a lynx. Why? To avoid detection? Perhaps just to catch Pettigrew, who is likely in rat form.

“Just do it, Percy, will you?” Myrtle snaps, her voice rising into the type of hysterical cry he hasn’t heard from her in years. He exhales through his nose and then nods, once, before turning the small dial on the Time Turner.

The corridor blurs around him. It’s a bit like a Portkey, if a Portkey was horrid, and filled his stomach with gurgling fire. It’s a bit like Apparation, too, if Apparation squeezed every fibre of his being until he wanted to scream and explode from the pressure. It’s a bit like the Floo as well, the sense that the entire world is swirling around him.

Then it stops, and Percy falls to the ground, gasping, wanting to scream. His head feels incredibly tight, as if he has plummeted many metres underground and the air pressure has irrevocably changed. His stomach is churning, and his vision is blurry, despite his glasses. As he coughs, unable to get off his hands and knees, he feels his heartbeat thudding loudly through his body, pounding in his ears, and he wants to scream. His body feels alien, his fingers distant, his skin burning, as if he is occupying a space he has no right to be in.

Gradually, slowly, he comes back to himself. His magic surges and dances around him, outlining his body in gold sparks, and then forcibly pulling all of the millions of pieces that comprise his body together with a snap. He calls to it, first instinctively and then with purpose, using all of what he’d learned from Tom to force his magic come to his aid, until he feels the warmth of his magic settle around him like a cloak, and the roaring in his ears begins to abate. His head still throbs, and his stomach still gurgles uncomfortably, but he is able to look around him and slowly, slowly, pull himself to his feet.

If that is what it feels like to use a Time Turner, no wonder they are not more commonly stolen from the Department of Mysteries. Percy wonders how Hermione stands it.

His clock charm is a bit flaky, the numbers blurring into each other, but he looks at it and sees he has only seventeen minutes to get outside.

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After a frantic run through the castle, Percy skids through the open doors and makes a beeline to the Whomping Willow. It is growing dark, despite the summer day, and his body instinctively presses to the ground as his lynx-eyes register that it is the full moon.

Something about that is significant, but Percy cannot bring his mind to focus on it. As a lynx, he already struggles to focus on his human concerns, his lynx senses persistently and continuously trying to direct his attention to the realities of their existence: the smell of old blood, the whistle of the Whomping Willow’s thin branches as they crack and bend through the air, the mournful caw of a bird circling overhead.

With the added confusion from the Time Turner, his mind feels like jelly, sliding over one concern and then another as if they are immaterial. He waits, panting, at the edge of the Willow, and then whines and darts behind a small bush as a passageway implausibly opens in the tree itself—the shock is enough to clear some of the lynx thoughts from his befuddled mind—and a strange procession appears out of it.

Ron, Hermione, Harry; Sirius Black, talking in low tones to Harry; Lupin, looking elated, Levitating a bound Peter Pettigrew; Snape, bringing up the rear, with a perfectly blank face. Perhaps wondering how to get Pettigrew out of this situation without alerting everyone else to Snape's plan.

Percy narrows his eyes and hisses softly, pawing at the dirt. It looks as if everything is under control. Perhaps he misunderstood the Map?

Then, everything changes.

Lupin stiffens, Pettigrew falling to the ground with an unpleasant thud. He throws his head up to the sky, every tendon in his neck sinewy and visible, his eyes tracking something invisible in the sky.

Percy's lynx-mind registers the danger before his human brain does, and he is ten paces away by the time Lupin transforms into a werewolf and howls at the sky.

It's a blur of noise and motion, too confusing and overwhelming for him to fully process: Black, transforming into the dog, the Trio taking off at a sprint to the castle, Snape close behind, and the ropes around Pettigrew collapsing as he transforms into a rat.

Percy's heart stops and then starts again with uneven, terrified stutters. The werewolf is massive and terrifying, an ugly, scarred snout over intelligent eyes, its entire body a dangerous spring of muscles and claws. It is the most terrifying thing Percy has ever seen, and to his horror, he sees the beast turn to the Trio and howl.

Percy howls back, surprising himself, and the werewolf cuts itself off, turning its attention to Percy. Percy shivers and whines, his body recoiling into himself, and both his animal- and his human-mind go absolutely blank with terror as the werewolf begins to make its inquisitive way over to Percy and Pettigrew.

Except—even in Percy's fear, he registers that Pettigrew is bounding away in the opposite direction, tearing across the ground as fast as his rat-feet can take him.

Another animal yelps, and the werewolf stops again, his head turning to this new, interesting sound. Percy feels his heart stutter and begin to start, and then he tenses his muscles in an attempt to release his fear. Pettigrew. They need Pettigrew.

Go, Percy tells himself, and he lets his lynx senses take over as he leaps after the rat.

The rat is fast and agile, darting with unerring accuracy toward the Forbidden Forest. It takes all of Percy's instincts, feline and human, to track him and hunt him down. They dodge trees and vines, leap over small puddles in the ground, and twist around animals as if they aren't

even there. Pettigrew doesn't dive for a hole or the base of a tree like Percy had expected; he runs in a flat out tilt toward some invisible destination.

The edge of the wards, Percy realises, lunging faster.

He gives himself entirely over to the lynx, feeling his rage and fear subside into bloodlust and anticipation. The rat is his prey, and he's hungry. He sees the muscles in the rat's hind quarters bunch; he's feinting; and *there!*

Percy's jaws come down on Scabbers, and only at the last second does he remember not to bite down.

Scabbers freezes, his body quivering in fear. He doesn't know that Percy is the lynx (or maybe he does?). He's clearly deciding whether to transform back—as is Percy—but they both hear the low growl of a much more dangerous animal and stay precisely as they are.

(Percy would have said that staring into the eyes of the basilisk, even in memory, was the most frightening experience of his life to date. Looking up into the golden eyes of Lupin the werewolf, a Death Eater clutched between his jaws, surpassed that by several orders of magnitude).

For a long, silent second, the animals stare at each other. With some instinct Percy didn't know he had, he bows, exposing his neck in an act of submission. Pettigrew is perfectly still inside his mouth.

And suddenly Sirius is there, or at least a large black dog, nipping at the werewolf's heels. Lupin turns and snarls and Sirius flees, enticing the wolf to chase after him.

Percy exhales in relief. Pettigrew takes the opportunity to try and wiggle free; Percy bites down again, feeling the rat’s heartbeat stutter in his mouth. If Pettigrew were to transform back right now, Percy realises, some of his human logic returning after the lust of the hunt, it would kill Percy, so Percy has to transform first and catch Pettigrew.

He almost doesn’t make it. The moment Percy drops Scabbers, the rat lunges again, but Percy has gone through three years of Animagus practice with McGonagall and is able to transform back, orient on the rat, and hit him with a Stunning spell before the rat makes it more than a few metres away.

Then he transforms back to a lynx, creeping over to place his paws over the rat. He does not want to be human, not tonight, not here.

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Percy sits there, motionless, for the next two hours, too afraid to move, too afraid to think. He relaxes into the lynx, not wanting to consider what his next move would have to be, not

wanting to contemplate his brother on the run from a werewolf.

He *had* to go after Pettigrew. He saw Ron himself, returning with Hermione and Harry to the Common Room. The time travel paradox states that what will happen has already happened. If Ron was going to be attacked by the werewolf, it would have already happened.

But he still left his thirteen year old brother in danger, *again*.

(How many times is he going to do this? How many more times will he stay in the shadows, as lynx or human or something else, while his brother and Harry and Hermione put themselves in danger?)

Finally, *finally*, Snape arrives. Percy backs away from Pettigrew, hiding in the shadows at least one more time, and as he'd thought, Snape forces Pettigrew to wake and revert back to his human form with a few savage jabs of his wand.

"Crucio," Snape breathes, almost lovingly, and Pettigrew howls with misery, an unearthly, inhuman sound that causes Percy to whine softly in sympathy before he realises he's making a sound. Snape trains the spell on Pettigrew for just a minute before stopping, letting the man pant in agony on the forest floor. "We have just a second, Pettigrew—or should I say *Wormtail*," Snape says mockingly. "Answer carefully, for your life depends on it. Are you loyal to the Dark Lord?"

"Are you?" Pettigrew huffs out boldly.

"*Crucio*."

This time Pettigrew only shrieks for thirty seconds before Snape ends the spell.

"I'm loyal, damn you," sobs Pettigrew, shaking and making no effort to untwist his body from its contortions in the mud. "Even if it has cost me everything I have."

"You have spent twelve years of your own volition with the *Weasleys*; one wonders whether the cost was enacted by your loyalty or your incompetence. Now. The Dark Lord is still alive," Snape says, enunciating carefully. "He is but a shade; I'm sure you recall Quirrell, or were you too busy dodging cats to notice your Lord possessing a professor in the castle you inhabit? Find him, Pettigrew, and let him know that he has followers waiting to take up the call. Inform me as soon as you find him."

"But—you're Dumbledore's," Pettigrew gasps.

Snape rolls his eyes. "By Merlin's beard, one would think you've never heard of an alibi. Let's make this easy for your rat brain then, shall we? *Imperio.*"

Snape locks eyes intently with Pettigrew, whose face goes slack instantly. Percy does not know what instructions exactly he is passing to Pettigrew, and for a second he doubts himself. Maybe Snape has been fooling him this whole time?

But no, if there was one thing Harry was abundantly clear about, it was that Severus Snape, hated professor, was loyal to the bitter end to Albus Dumbledore.

(On that last, well, Percy doubts very much it was solely Dumbledore who commanded Snape's loyalty through two wars, but at the very least he commanded Snape).

"Go," Snape says, releasing Pettigrew. "Now."

Pettigrew nods his head shakily and disappears. Percy tracks his progression until he's out of even a lynx's line of sight and then looks up to Snape, who nods slightly.

Percy transforms into himself, brushing dirt off his robes. He aims for nonchalant, as if the sight of his professor casually wielding two Unforgivables is perfectly normal. "Improvising?"

Snape gives him a sour look, seemingly unsurprised at Percy's presence. "How *did* this debacle start tonight, I wonder," he comments flatly as they begin to walk back to the castle. "Five galleons says it's due to your idiocy or Potter's."

Percy ignores this somewhat accurate summation of the situation and focuses on the important consideration left unanswered. "The Trio?" Snape's look of disdain is potent enough to momentarily stop Percy in his tracks. Well, they're a bit young yet for the nickname, but it's convenient, and Percy really has more important things to worry about. "Professor, is my brother unharmed?"

"He should be," Snape begins, but trails off. Ahead, too far to make out clearly, a dark cloud amassess over the edge of the lake.

Percy frowns at it. Crows? Shadows?

"Dementors," breathes Snape, and starts to run.

Percy is close at his heels, a feeling of panic welling up inside his chest. *Happy memory*, he counsels himself, even as Snape sends his doe bounding ahead, even as he grapples uselessly with the spell. Percy has avoided the Dementors all year, but he dreads passing by them on the way to Hogsmeade. When Harry had fallen from the sky, the Dementors swarming overhead as the sky thundered, Percy's heart had stopped and his skin had turned cold. He'd practised his Patronus for hours, but he can only manage his raven intermittently, and never with any confidence.

"Weasley, whatever ineptitude is preventing your Patronus from materialising, I want it dispatched with, *now*," Snape bites over his shoulder. "We're still too far, but it may help stave away others."

Percy speeds up. "I'm *trying*." Oh Merlin, oh Merlin—

—a stag, brilliant and silver, materialises out of nowhere.

The stag is the most beautiful thing that Percy has ever seen, save perhaps the Philosopher's Stone, or maybe even the basilisk. It glows with intensity and focus, and the Dementors turn to it as one, sensing perhaps their own downfall. When it charges, mist seems to swirl from

its side, settling over the prone figures—and now that they're closer, Percy can see four (three?) prone figures—and reviving them slightly.

Snape curses and casts his doe again, sending it into the fray. Seeing the doe and the stag dance around each other, trailing silver streaks of mist and magic behind them, is oddly beautiful, and oddly balanced. But Percy does not get distracted by the question of precisely whose stag that was. He knows the Trio is nearly somewhere, hiding, but certainly a Patronus would be out of the reach of three thirteen year olds.

He casts a cursory glance around him but most of his attention is focused on the bodies by the lake. As he and Snape arrive, they drop to their knees besides the Trio.

"Black isn't here," Snape murmurs to himself as he casts diagnostic spells at Harry, Percy dividing his attention between Ron and Hermione. "Why did they attack if Black wasn't here?"

"We've got to take them to the hospital wing, Professor," Percy says urgently. Ron's eyes are fluttering but his skin is pale, his freckles like dark stains against a white sheet.

Snape turns and casts an assessing glance around them, but the lake is empty, the large tree at its bank silent. He narrows his eyes, clearly puzzling over the situation they stumbled into.

Tick tock, whispers an echo of Tom in Percy's ear, and Percy shakes his head. He needs to get back soon, before he runs out of time. "Professor. Can you get Harry?"

This snaps Snape out of whatever contemplation had settled over his face. Snape nods once, briskly, and Levitates Harry.

"We're still so far," Percy says worriedly as they begin to walk away from the lake. He stops in his tracks. "Mimsy!"

Dutiful, loyal, still answering to his commands Mimsy. She appears in a second, bowing low.

"Master Percy," she says with a gasp. "What is you've done?"

"Can you take us all to the hospital wing right now?" Percy asks urgently.

Mimsy eyes Snape. Whatever feat of logic she's used to excuse her taking commands from Percy clearly may not stand up in the face of an actual Hogwarts professor witnessing her disobedience.

Snape exhales in irritation. "Elf, do as he says." When she still hesitates, he speaks sharply. "I am commanding you."

This decides it for Mimsy, and with a pop she disappears first with Hermione, then with Ron, then with Harry.

"Leave the lying to me."

Percy nods. "I need to go back. I used Hermione's Time Turner."

“A *Time Turner?”* Snape has just enough time to ask incredulously before Mimsy returns for him. Left alone, Percy takes a moment to look around him, to the dark Hogwarts grounds lit only by the pale full moon, and then he transforms back into the lynx for the last time, feeling his muscles complain from the strain of the unfamiliar movements. He pads slowly back toward the castle, beginning to process the panic that his adrenaline and intellectual curiosity has held at bay for the past few hours.

They’ve been lucky; incredibly lucky. Percy isn’t sure where Black is—hopefully alive—but Pettigrew has been tasked with finding the Dark Lord and all three members of the Trio are alive. One hurdle down. Several to go, but at least one plot set into motion.

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(“You look *awful*,” says Myrtle, the second that Percy enacts his privacy wards. Percy eyes his past self, obediently and grumpily closing his eyes, and feels privately that *he* looks awful too. “What happened?”

“Snape sent Pettigrew away with the Imperius,” Percy confirms, and Myrtle sags with relief. “Everyone lived, I think, though the Trio seemed to nearly succumb to the Dementors.”

“And the time magic?”

Percy thinks of that terrible, awful second where his body had not yet formed, where his magic swirled around him like waves in a whirlpool, where had he not known to call his magic to him, he would have dissipated into the wind, a blur of insubstantial magic released into the world, and shivers. “Never again,” he says with emphasis.

“Should you still go?” Myrtle asks hesitantly.

Percy looks again at his past self, at the dark circles under his eyes and the mulish set of his jaw. It is strange to see him, his nearly-adult body, more familiar than any of the selves he’s seen in the mirror for the last seven years. “I have to,” he says heavily. “Tell him—tell him to go in his form.”

“I don’t think I can tell him that, can I?”

Percy looks up and meets her gaze. “Lupin is a *werewolf*, and tonight is the full moon,” he says meaningfully, and Myrtle pales to a ghostly white.)

***

The next day, Percy is, predictably, summoned to see the Headmaster. Trapped in the uncomfortably small chair in front of the ornate wooden desk, watching all manner of silver instruments whirl and shake dubiously, Percy tries to press his heels into the plush carpet to ground himself. Facing Dumbledore never seems to be easier.

Dumbledore's voice is less warm than it had been when Percy was eleven, but it is not particularly *aggressive*. "You say you followed them?"

"I saw them all rushing out of the Common Room and it was very close to curfew," Percy says, avoiding Dumbledore's gaze by staring at his knees. "I should have alerted a professor; I'm sorry, Professor." Percy looks up, his eyes wide, his mind filled with his fear, hoping to deflect the questioning he'd known he would be subjected to by Dumbledore. "Did you know Professor Lupin was a werewolf, Headmaster?"

"Prejudice is beneath you, Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore chides gently.

"It's not prejudice when he forgets to take a potion and nearly kills my brother," Percy snaps back. Time for another attack. "Professor, why aren't the grounds warded against unregistered Animagi? I looked up the registry when I registered; neither Black nor Pettigrew are on the list. If Animagi can get through the wards, that's a huge security risk, Headmaster."

"Quite," Dumbledore says dryly. "Rest assured, Mr. Weasley, that vulnerability will not remain for long. Please continue."

"Well, when my brother hadn't come back to the Common Room, I thought I ought to go look for him. I saw all of the Dementors outside and I heard Ron yelling. I saw Professor Snape outside as well." He flushes, genuinely embarrassed, and admits, "I couldn't get my Patronus to work. Professor Snape, I think, cast his…there was a large stag, but I still don't know whose Patronus that was."

Dumbledore smiles enigmatically. "One of Hogwarts' many mysteries," he excuses himself.

Percy eyes him but doesn't comment. "Then Professor Snape summoned a House Elf. That's the end of it, sir."

"Thank you for your actions," Dumbledore says warmly. "Once again your quick thinking may have saved your brother's life. Mr. Weasley, I had asked you to keep me apprised of any oddities occurring; yet I did not hear from you all year."

Percy's ears burn slightly. "Nothing happened all year, sir. They spent most of the year fighting over their pets."

Dumbledore chuckles and then stands, walking to where Fawkes is eyeing Percy rather pugnaciously for a peace-bearing bird. "Oh, thirteen! What a difficult age. Well, Mr. Weasley, I understand you are taking on a post with the Ministry after you graduate our hallowed halls? Minerva was most upset that you declined her offer."

Percy nods but doesn't say anything.

Dumbledore turns and looks at Percy. “I would ask you to continue to keep me informed in your new role,” he says steadily. “I believe you have read the signs as I have. We may be in turmoil, Mr. Weasley.”

Percy’s mouth is suddenly dry. He nods again.

“Please do not leave anything out, no matter how trivial; we can agree that even arguments about pets have longer-reaching implications. Both Severus and Minerva can filter the information and update me as needed.”

How truly condescending, particularly when Dumbledore has the audacity to ask Percy to spy on his new manager for his old school headmaster!

Down, Percy, the memory of Tom’s voice whispers in Percy’s head.

Percy nods and tries to look honoured. “Yes, Headmaster.”

Dumbledore smiles and returns to his desk. “Anything else you’d like to tell me, Mr. Weasley?”

A movement from behind Dumbledore catches Percy’s attention. Phineas Nigellus has made his way to a frame right behind Dumbledore’s head. The figure leans forward as if he could escape the painted canvas, looking intently at Percy, whose reply dies in his throat as he meets the cold gaze of his ancestor.

Clearly unimpressed, Phineas narrows his eyes at Percy, letting his gaze drag over Percy's body.

“The portraits,” Percy says, the words falling out of his mouth before he can realise he’s opened his mouth. “They are different, these portraits, than the ones outside."

Dumbledore does not look thrown by the question, though Percy doubts that Dumbledore had expected him to mention the portraits. “They are indeed, dear boy,” says the Headmaster serenely, though the glint behind his half-moon glasses reminds Percy uncomfortably of the diadem. “Not many have realised that.”

“They have their own magic,” says Percy, still looking at Phineas, who looks steadily back at Percy, one eyebrow cocked as if to challenge whatever Percy is going to say next. “Each of these portraits. They are their own anchor.”

Something in Dumbledore’s eyes seems to sharpen. “Minerva did not exaggerate your intelligence,” he says, but to Percy it sounds more like an accusation than a compliment. “If that is all, my boy, I will ask you to leave; I have a prior appointment to keep with Professor Lupin, and he is rather punctual.”

Percy nods distractedly, taking one last glance at Phineas before wrenching his gaze away. It is odd to see one of his direct ancestors like that, as if they were alive, evaluating him as he speaks. He wonders whether Phineas ever watches him in the hallways, whether he asks Dumbledore about Draco or Tonks or any of his other descendents.

The portrait of Phineas *is* different from the portraits outside the Headmaster's office, Percy muses as he follows Dumbledore silently down the rotating staircase and politely bids him a good afternoon at the base of the stairs. Percy had felt it, as Phineas had looked at him so quietly and so intently. The portrait of Phineas is crisper, cleaner, more *alive* than the portraits dotting the halls. Percy would not have been surprised to see the man step out of the frame and come to life, his cool, imperious gaze all the more chilling on a real wizard's face.

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The NEWTs go precisely as Percy had planned. The exams feel comfortable, like an old friend, and he takes a vicious pleasure in the way that his quill scratches authoritatively across the parchment. He will not have many tests in his future that he already knows how to pass, and so he methodically and carefully excels on each exam, so that at least he has the memory of this triumph if later trials are too hard to bear.

Landon does not succeed in a permanent Charm, but he proves something interesting, or at least he boasts to Sonali and Percy and Henry and the rest after the Charms practical has finished. "Definitely an Outstanding," he assures Percy, who remains quiet, allowing Landon to gloat without dampening his spirits. Percy most definitely got the first, after all.

Percy's Light Ritual to protect a treasured item from breakage, while interesting, is not as impressive as he'd hoped, though Professor Vector seemed quite taken with Percy's ten neatly tabulated scrolls, each containing formulae and rune diagrams labelled, cross-referenced, and clearly delineated. The project had quite fallen by the wayside, despite his aspirations for it.

The last weekend of term, however, Percy spends by himself in the library. He has one last assignment to study for before he leaves the castle and erases *Ignatius P.* from the book of records that has faithfully hidden his reading activities for the last seven years.

***

"You wanted Lupin to be revealed as a werewolf."

Snape looks darkly pleased with himself, a smile curling the corner of his lips. "I am affronted—nay, appalled at the insinuation."

"You knew it was a full moon," insists Percy. "You knew Lupin would forget the potion."

"I did not *know,*" corrects Snape. His smile widens. "I merely suspected."

"My brother could have become a werewolf!"

Snape's smile slides off his lips so quickly that Percy blinks, taken aback. "Your brother was in no real danger, not while Sirius Black was there."

"You didn't know Black would be able to forestall Lupin."

"I knew," Snape says, voice filled with malice.

“You couldn’t have known,” objects Percy, clenching his jaw. “They could have all *died*, and for what, because you don’t like Lupin?”

Snape leans forward, his dark eyes glittering, and hisses, “I knew, Weasley. The beast tried to kill me, once, and Potter was able to fight him off. I have made werewolves a…particular study of mine. I know seven spells to kill a werewolf; your brother was not in any danger, and I will not have you questioning me again.”

Percy blinks at the revelations in this sentence, but oddly, the only thing he can focus on is, “So you owe Harry’s father a *life debt*?” Percy shivers at the look of rage that twists Snape’s face. No wonder the man hates Harry so much. “I’m sorry,” Percy hastens to say. “That must be…difficult for you to bear.”

This, to Percy’s surprise, forestalls what he had been *sure* would be a torrential outburst. Instead, Snape takes several breaths and visible tucks away his anger. “Indeed.”

Percy had meant to come in here and admonish Snape, but now his courage deserts him in the face of Snape’s rage. Instead he only sighs. "Well, it's all started now."

"Yes. And you are to leave Hogwarts in no more than a month."

Percy sighs again. Now that the time has come to leave the castle, he finds himself lingering in warm corners, growing sentimental over his favourite alcove or the books that adorn the shelves near his table in the library. His partnership with Snape, while entirely unexpected, is strangely no less important to him than his association with McGonagall. It's been nearly fourteen years in the castle, a thought which never fails to make him feel old and weary.

His stomach is queasy; to distract himself, he asks, "How did Black escape the grounds?"

"I am not sure, but I believe Albus had something to do with it," Snape says with a sigh. "A broom was reported missing from the student stores, and despite what many of the first years think, it is no trivial task to steal school property without alerting the Heads of House. But I cannot be certain."

Percy nods to himself thoughtfully. As usual, Dumbledore perhaps was waiting for Harry to act before stepping in himself, though he supposes that Black may have been able to dismantle the wards around the brooms—if his magic was functional. One of the boys who made the Map certainly would be able to steal a school broom.

"You *must* find the other Horcruxes," Snape says, watching him intently. "I will focus on unravelling their mysteries."

Percy swallows but meets Snape's gaze. For three slow heartbeats, he hesitates, with the type of hesitation that can only underscore the knowledge that the words on the tip of his tongue, once uttered, can never be taken back, never be forgotten. "I have an idea."

"Proceed."

His hands are sweaty, dreadfully so, and he clenches his hands into fists inside the draping sleeves of his robes. *First steps first, and then the second*. In a rush, it all spills out: "I think we should make a portrait of Tom." He sees Snape's eyebrow raise and hastens to add, "With the diadem."

"You jest, surely," says Snape incredulously. "That wouldn't—that would never—oh, I see. You've been planning this for a while, haven't you, Mr. Weasley."

He's not been *planning* it, per se; but it would be lying to say that the idea hasn't been simmering inside him like a cauldron on the lowest flame, an intermittent bubble rising to the surface with the quietest of pops. Of *course* he'd had the idea, all those years ago, though he'd thought of perhaps using the diary as the *sample* of Tom. Percy is analytical, and logical, and sees opportunity where others merely falter. One could not expect him to research magical portraiture for nearly half a decade without considering there is at least one portrait it would be quite opportunistic to animate.

"Absolutely not," Snape says. "I do not want to hear another second of this idea."

"The foundational theory is completely valid," Percy says quickly, feeling boneless with relief now that that idea has been released into the world, to linger on another soul other than his. "Portraits can be completed years after a death, using blood or skin or bone that is not fresh. I believe the Horcrux would qualify."

"And what would this process do to the diadem?"

Percy knows that Snape must be shocked to hear Percy’s wild suggestion, but the other man seems to be controlling it well, asking his questions in a dry, clinical tone, as if Percy had come to him with nothing more than an outlandish research proposal.

"Well, I've completed some preliminary analysis, Professor, based on what we believe to be the constituent materials of the diadem, as well as its protective charms. Obviously we do not know *everything* Lady Ravenclaw did to it, but I believe the recipe can be modified to take a base of goblin silver."

Percy is ready with the parchment. Facing Snape is no different then preparing for an exam, and Percy is always prepared for an exam. Snape takes it and scans it mutely. Percy takes the opportunity to continue.

"It may not destroy the Horcrux, but rather allow it to transfer form—but we can still destroy it when the time comes. Tom would have been older when he made the diadem. Maybe it is the last he ever made. Portraits can't do magic, or even leave their frames if there are no other portraits with the same magical boundaries applied. He can tell us where to look."

Snape seems to barely be listening, his eyes gleaming as he continues to scan the parchment. Percy knows that look, or can at least guess at it. They both know this idea may come to naught, but the idea of using magic in this way—Potions and Transfiguration and soul magic all inextricably combined—is incredibly appealing.

"I will look into it," Snape says abruptly. "Your knowledge of Transfiguration is sufficient?"

"I believe so, sir," Percy says confidently.

"And your…artistic abilities?"

Percy flushes. "I am working on those."

"I see." There is a long pause. Percy shifts on his feet. "It is likely this will come to nothing."

He risks a smile. "But you want to research it anyway."

"That you have the audacity to assume even the *smallest* of my intentions, Mr. Weasley, indicates what I have long suspected: though it is apparent to all that you are rather dim, shockingly you seem to believe otherwise," Snape says dryly.

But he's still looking at the parchment.

*

Percy graduates. It’s not as momentous as the first time around. Henry gives the speech instead of Percy, though Percy does win an award for beating the previous record of OWLs and NEWTs (Tom took one more NEWT, but Percy took another OWL, and Tom only got an EE in Divination both times).

Tonks is there, though—all three of them—and Charlie and Bill, and his parents, and Aunt Muriel. Professor McGonagall tears up when she presents Percy with his diploma. Snape does not do any such thing but a meaningful look passes between them nevertheless. Even Myrtle comes, shining in the brilliant sunlight, sitting next to Ginny on the end of the row.

There’s a frost between Aunt Muriel and his mother, particularly since Aunt Muriel insists on taking Percy to introduce him to the heads of several families also in attendance as her new heir.

And then his bags are packed and once again he’s leaving Hogwarts for the last time. He does not get as drunk as his classmates on their last night, though he does accept a drink, and he does go with Landon to the party, and he does smile as warmly as he can as Henry and Mariana and Alexander and all the rest recount their greatest hits, their best Quidditch wins, their hardest exams, their funniest memories that he was not included in. He takes an hour to walk around the castle himself, slowly and methodically, drinking in the sights and smells and sounds of Hogwarts. He’ll need all of its strength to combat the coming months.

It’s an unsteady new world, and he has the Philosopher’s Stone and Ravenclaw’s diadem and a burden that has grown no lighter over the years.

Chapter End Notes

Tick tock, Percy.

DISCORD (1/3)

Chapter Notes

> Well, well, well. Goblet of Fire. Naturally, everything will proceed exactly as planned, right?
>
> I really love hearing from all of you! Particularly your reactions to certain scenes/lines or your predictions as to what is coming next. As a reminder, we have several years to go (and our runway of predictable timeline events is running short) so buckle up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

BOOK TWO

WORKER

(THE MINISTRY)

CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCORD (1/3)

1994 — 1995 (Percy is 18 & 31, Harry is 14, and Severus is 34, and Voldemort is trapped in the form of a child)

June 1994

Percy had spent months alternatively dreading and anticipating his departure from Hogwarts, but when the moment arrives, there's so much to do that he's not able to spend much time at all thinking about the fact that he has once again graduated.

There's a fight to have with his parents that in truth goes much the same as it does the first time, though with a new weight behind *abandoning your family* that sits heavy in his stomach. There's an apartment to find, which is new; he and Tonks spend an enjoyable day in London scouting out affordable flats, and if he pays a bit more than one could afford on a Ministry salary, there's always Aunt Muriel—and not a Philosopher's Stone—to blame.

(Oh, how it warms one to have *money*; how it changes the whole perspective on moving out and starting a new life. Percy plans to outfit his apartment with brand new furniture and a gorgeous rug and round kitchen table and an old oak desk and when he thinks of it, he feels something like peace).

There's the traditional Graduates' Weekend, where one housemate hosts the rest at their large, ornate manor. Percy had skipped the affair during the prior timeline, but he attends this one not least out of curiosity to see the extent of Henry's wealth. Immense, but less than Percy had thought, is the conclusion he draws after the two nights wrap up without any particularly noteworthy displays of largess.

(Henry *does* have a Quidditch pitch, which characterises the weekend in fairly predictable ways. Nevertheless, Percy is glad to attend; while he never quite managed to feel close with the other Gryffindors, in many ways they are more familiar to him than his own family, after living with them for fourteen years, and spending two last days with them feels like a proper way to cap off his second childhood).

There's a letter from Bill, informing Percy he's taken a job with Gringotts. There's a slight implication the two might live together, but Percy ignores it completely in his reply. There's a much larger undertone of condescension—*heard about your fight with Mum, family's all we got, Percy*—that incenses Percy to the point where his reply is clipped and formal, even though he *knows* it'll make it worse, yes Charlie, Bill's always been intolerable, the best way to deal with it is to ignore him.

There's a job to start, too. Aunt Muriel takes him shopping after the summer solstice—she wishes for harmony, which makes him a bit sad, and he wishes aloud for knowledge in the absence of anything else to say—and this time they buy the robes that Percy has coveted all these years. He chooses dark, stately colours, and enjoys the way they drape around his ankles.

(Maybe it's the robes, or the more commanding way in which Percy carries himself, but Crouch remembers his name this time—and, when Percy finishes drafting the new cauldron regulation bill in under a week, begins to involve him in more complicated tasks. Percy never realised how he'd used to hold himself, how everyone could look at him and see the insecurity he wore on his face like cursed pimples).

And, of course, there's the portrait to consider, both in terms of the veritable mounds of research that still await him, and in terms of the admittedly daunting task of learning to paint at a master level, or something close to it.

He lives at the Burrow for the rest of the summer; his lease begins September 1, and his parents insist that he spend time at home before he starts. He spends most of his time in his room, finishing his work on cauldron regulations, familiar like an old friend.

The Ministry is quiet. There's no hint of the Dark Lord, not really. Percy reads the news anxiously and writes to Snape under the old assumed name of *Ignatius*, but Pettigrew has not sent word.

(He does notice that in each reply, Snape includes a brief sentence involving Myrtle, which makes Percy feel marginally assuaged of guilt for leaving her so abruptly after the jarring events of the full moon).

Percy excels at his job, of course. He remembers everyone's names, he's a few years ahead of gossip, and he is nothing if not meticulous. And, after seven (more) years of Snape, even

Crouch cannot intimidate him.

(Is this how it feels to be a man like Tom Riddle, like Lucius Malfoy? To walk around and know that one is intrinsically *more* than the rest, that one has the knowledge and money to render oneself powerful? For if it does, well, Percy even more cannot forgive his mother for throwing away her inheritance. They may never have been *rich*, but they could have been *respected)*.

Harry arrives the night before the Quidditch World Cup, looking underfed and scrawny. Ron, who seems to have grown a whole head in the last fortnight, towers over him. Both are sporting shaggy long hair that does nothing to hide the changes puberty is ruthlessly enacting on their faces. Ron, in particular, will need to learn a good spell for spots on his face. Hermione looks considerably older than both of them, though he expects that is par for the course for teenagers. Ginny, by contrast, still is small and weedy, and Percy cannot prevent himself from ensuring that she receives adequate portions of protein at supper, though she rolls her eyes at him whenever he replaces a soft roll for an extra leg of chicken.

Percy *means* to be friendly, he really does—but the teenagers stampede into the house, their mother is hollering at Fred and George, and Percy needs to finish this blasted report before tomorrow, so he leans out his door and bites a reprimand at the Trio before he can stop himself.

"Percy thinks he's very important, now that he has a job with the Ministry," Ron confides in a low tone to Harry, still clearly audible through the door Percy just slammed.

Percy is starting to get a handle on his responsibilities at work and regarding the Dark Lord, but why is it that dealing with his family never becomes easier?

(That night, Bill and Charlie make a complete racket slamming together the old tables outside, as if the Weasleys have tables to spare. Percy opens his window, incandescent with rage, and Bill gives him a smirk that is so infuriating that all Percy can do is spell his window shut, incensed, though he notices that Charlie ends the game shortly after).

The next morning, Percy rather decides he's irritated with both of his elder brothers, and Apparates precisely at nine, though they'd planned to leave at eleven. He makes his way through the crowd of tents, trying to calm himself through the breathing exercises he learned during his Animagus training.

He finds Crouch easily: the older man is near the entrance to the stadium, directing the flow of foreign dignitaries to their proper places. Percy smiles and slips in beside him, the last of his irritation melting away as he adopts the polite, competent mask that is his best weapon at the Ministry.

Crouch is distracted, as Percy vaguely remembers him being last time as well. He snaps intermittently at the flow of people streaming in all directions, but as a rule he is silent and thoughtful. Understandable; the Cup is one of the largest events the British Ministry has put on in decades, and Crouch, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, is perfectly aware how pivotal this moment is for his career.

Percy's, too, if he can imagine a career after the War.

(And he *can*, too. When he first started this mission he was so engulfed in his own fear and guilt that he'd recklessly vowed to sacrifice his life if it meant he succeeded in his task. In theory, the sentiment still stands, but every year that passes imbues Percy with new resolve, with new ambitions. He has no intention of dying, not for Tom, not for Fred, not for Harry).

Crouch hurries off to his tent after the steady stream of poorly dressed wizards dries to a trickle, though he does technically have a seat in the Top Box if he wants it, and Percy returns to his tent. His family, unfortunately, has arrived.

"A bit eager, are you?" Bill says teasingly, pushing a plate of sausages toward him.

Percy sniffs. "I was helping Mr. Crouch with the foreign dignitaries," he says stiffly, though he is hungry and so spears a sausage for himself.

Fred nods sagely to George. "One wonders how the Ministry gets on without dear Percy."

"It doesn't," George says wisely.

Percy rolls his eyes and eats silently. It's easy to disappear after lunch; the odd man out, Percy just makes a vague excuse and walks away. He's headed to the Top Box to see if he can glean any important information.

Percy takes the opportunity to chat with the Minister of Magic for Bulgaria; he'd brushed up on his French and Bulgarian his first year back at Hogwarts in what now seems like his copious free time. He's not perfectly fluent but he's at least conversant, and the Bulgarian Minister shares conspiratorial glances with him whenever the British Ministry officials speak loudly and slowly in English.

He chats with Fudge and Bagman, too, though does not toady up to the former as much as he once would have otherwise, knowing perfectly well the man's days are numbered. (It reminds him; he needs to begin networking with Scrimgeour, who is nowhere to be seen. The man hates Quidditch).

The brood of Weasleys and their ever-present hanger-ons all clamber into the top box through some clever manoeuvring of his father, who, while unambitious, does not lack all sense of political machinations. The Malfoys are there too, though for entirely different reasons.

"Mr. Weasley-Prewett," Lucius greets him, politely, after exchanging a series of barbs with Arthur.

Percy smiles coldly back. "Percy, please," he says, in part to see his family's faces turn identical shades of red.

"Congratulations on your new *elevated* position with the Ministry," Lucius continues, letting his eyes flick deliberately around the top box. "The Department of International Cooperation is a fine place to begin one's career, don't you agree, Narcissa?"

Narcissa nods warmly. “You’ll get excellent exposure to all sorts of influential people,” she agrees. “Especially this year, of course.”

Percy has actually not yet been officially informed about the Triwizard Tournament—her comment not improbably designed to probe at this—but his prior knowledge enables him to smile as if in on the joke. “I’ve been working on my communication, in the name of international cooperation,” he says loftily in French, causing her to laugh lightly.

Draco, by her side, raises an eyebrow at him. “Still studying after Hogwarts, I see,” he says, also in French, a smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth. “Congratulations on your graduation.”

"And where is Mr. Crouch?" Lucius asks, switching back to English. There's an edge to his smile that Percy instinctively wants to flinch away from; Crouch and Lucius do not get along well.

"He went to monitor the tents," Percy excuses his boss, glancing at the seats in the second row. Crouch's elf is there, obediently saving a seat, but Crouch is nowhere to be found.

Lucius says something in French that sounds somewhat like *always watchful*, though it sounds like an idiom that Percy does not know.

“Come sit with us,” Ron hisses.

Draco’s expression instantly turns derisive. “Hello, Weasley,” he says. “Don’t imagine you speak French, do you? You’ve barely a handle on English.”

“Now, boys,” Lucius says, smirking over Percy’s head, undoubtedly at Arthur. “In the name of cooperation—if not communication—I believe we can leave bickering at the door.”

“In the name of cooperation, we can leave *plenty* at the door, Lucius,” Arthur says darkly.

Lucius raises a groomed eyebrow. “Prejudice, for one.”

Percy has to admit, that even though he *knows* Lucius will become embroiled in the Dark Lord’s plot to murder and steal and lie, the man truly has style.

“Come, Draco. The game is soon to start,” Lucius continues before Arthur can respond. He inclines his head marginally at Percy. “Percy, please feel free to see me when you’re back in the office. I can introduce you to some of our old family friends."

Percy freezes and mutters what he hopes is something graceful. Befriending Draco is one thing; the kid’s not that bad, even though he can be a bit of a snob. Meeting *old family friends* is quite another, particularly if they have tattoos on their arms.

Indeed, Arthur is displeased when Percy takes his seat behind him. “Careful, Perce,” the man says, shaking his head. “Lucius is not one to trifle with, no matter how flattering his intentions.”

Not for the first time, Percy wonders when, exactly, the enmity between Lucius and Arthur began. He'd asked Aunt Muriel, and she hadn't believed there was a generational feud between the two families. It must have been something more personal, something between the two men that neither has forgotten.

The game is fantastic, and none are more excited than the twins, who reveal they made the exact bet with Bagman that would, in theory, entitle them to quite a bit of money, if this game ends the same way it did in the last timeline. Percy doesn't remember the man too well, but he does remember the man's career ends with some embarrassing scandal of gambling and perhaps even petty theft. Certainly it is doubtful that Bagman would have the funds to pay up the twins. Hopefully the loss, if it happens, will encourage the twins to stop gambling away what little they have.

After the game is over, and the excitement has begun at the tents, Percy corners Charlie. "Listen," he says in an undertone. "They're expecting a bit of trouble once everyone starts drinking."

Charlie grins and raises his tankard of Butterbeer in reply. A nasty drink, like sugar and vinegar mixed into froth; Percy never understood the appeal himself. "I'll say. The kind of match that really defeats the purpose, innit? Can we really say which is the better team? *Beautiful* flying, though. And Krum! What a kid."

"I'm serious, Charlie," Percy continues. "Watch out for the others, will you?"

Bill, sensing a serious conversation from which he's being excluded, appears to hear this last. "Why? Your new job giving you some insider information, Perce?"

Percy rolls his eyes. "They're expecting some trouble," he repeats. "Just in case, we should be on our guard. I'll cover Ron."

Bill raises his eyebrows dramatically at Charlie. "I'll cover Ginny," he whispers, winking. Percy eyes him dourly. Firewhiskey, no doubt. Not to Percy's tastes either, though it has been several years since he's last had a drink. His prepubescent body couldn't handle a cocktail, no matter how much Percy wanted one over the years. In his prime, Percy was always a gin man. Sweetly bitter, and as smooth straight as it is with lime and tonic.

Charlie, at least, takes him a bit more seriously. "I'll take Fred and George if something does come up. Merlin knows those two will be in the thick of it if they can."

A few hours later, when the screams begin, all three brothers exchange looks—part of Percy feels smugly mollified when Bill grips his wand and flicks his eyes around for Ginny—and efficiently shoulder their intended marks.

"Boys, with me," Arthur cries.

"I think we should stay with the younger ones—"

"Fred, George, take them into the forest. Bill, Charlie, Percy, let's try to help the Ministry."

Percy swears internally, watching as Ron and the rest disappear into the woods. Will his parents *ever* realise that Percy knows what he is doing? In the confusion, he manages to sidestep his brothers, but though he follows a Point Me charm, he can't find Ron in the dark, woody forest.

It's suddenly very quiet; the branches are very still. Percy gulps and holds his wand tightly as he steps noiselessly through the trees.

He'd never really kept up with his duelling training, and he's bitterly regretting it as he flinches at every sound. To his right, he can see flickers of flame and hear splintered shouts. He remembers, even now, the sight of that family rotating slowly through the air, their knickers showing. To his left, he sees only darkness.

"*Morsmordre*," incants a voice, deep and strangely familiar. Percy spins, but he sees nothing, only a flash of green and then a skull hanging in the air, the snake hissing malevolently.

Percy takes just a second too long to look at it, his stomach twisted in fear, and so he finds himself under vicious attack without notice.

Well, not vicious. It's just a man—Amos Diggory, if he's not mistaken. Percy's shield is sufficient to protect him against Diggory's Stunning Spell, and he at least has the presence of mind to act quickly, casting a strong Lumos and stepping into the light.

"Weasley?"

"Percy Weasley, I work at the Ministry now, for Mr. Crouch. There was a man, I think; I heard his voice, from over there." Percy points to the thicket of trees just to his left.

Diggory eyes him suspiciously but investigates the trees. There's a small skirmish but he emerges brandishing Crouch's house elf, who Percy belatedly and suddenly remembers was dismissed at this very event for stealing someone's wand.

Idiot, idiot. How could he have forgotten? Crouch had covered it up, of course. There had been some gossip the next day, but then an assistant had been fired, and all talk stilled.

"Come," Diggory says, jerking his head brusquely.

Percy follows obediently, blinking as he emerges from the dark forest into a circle of men, all holding wands.

"Percy!" It's his father, his voice hoarse with relief. "Thank Merlin you're fine."

"Not so fast, Arthur," Diggory says. "He was at the scene of the crime."

"Percy?" Arthur looks confused. "Don't be absurd, Amos."

"I was right around there," Percy interjects before he can be accused of lying. "I got separated and then I heard Ron's voice, so I was trying to find him."

Arthur steps aside and reveals the three teenagers themselves, all looking pale and frightened.

"Oh, thank Merlin," Percy says, trying to project *loving brother*. "Did you lot hear that voice?"

"You heard it too?" Crouch shoulders his way to the front. He's not taken his eyes off the elf, but he looks up now to Percy.

Percy nods. "A young man, I'd say."

"We've got to check your wand," Amos says, still suspicious. Percy hands it over obediently. He's not stupid enough to cast illegal spells at a Ministry event. Indeed, the mist that spirals out confirms the last spells that Percy has cast: Lumos, Point Me, a Cleaning Charm from lunch.

Considerably friendlier, Amos returns the wand and then turns to the elf.

"*Ennervate*," he says, and the elf stirs, gasps, and begins to sob.

"She's got a wand," says one of the other wizards in disbelief as the elf covers her face with both hands.

"That's my wand," says Harry indignantly.

“Excuse me?” says Diggory, incredulously.

“That's my wand!” says Harry, more emphatically. “I dropped it!”

Diggory looks faintly disbelieving. “You dropped it? Is this a confession? You threw it aside after you conjured the Mark?”

“Amos, think who you're talking to!” Arthur interjects. Percy can tell by the set of his face that he's already decided something about the situation and won't be budged. “Is Harry Potter likely to conjure the Dark Mark?”

Diggory flushes and then plucks the wand from the elf's hand, examining it "Sorry…carried away…”

"I didn't drop it there, anyway,” Harry continues, jerking his thumb toward the trees beneath the skull. “I missed it right after we got into the woods.”

Why would Crouch's elf have a *wand*?

Crouch, silent, is clearly asking himself the same question. Percy eyes him but his superior's face reveals no secrets.

Diggory, meanwhile, rounds on the elf. "You found this wand, eh, elf? And you picked it up and thought you'd have some fun with it, did you?"

Percy has to interject here. "House elves can't use wands," he says. "Their magic isn't compatible. They're no more use for elves than they are for Squibs."

The elf gives her squeaky, emphatic confirmation, and Hermione defends her passionately. The shadow of the Mosmorde twisting out of the wand silences the group abruptly.

"So what are you suggesting, Weasley?" Crouch asks Percy, his tone as inscrutable as his voice.

Percy hesitates. "Only that someone else was involved. Someone that must not have had their own wand. Winky must have just picked it up."

"They probably nicked Potter's to avoid detection," says Diggory.

Percy shakes his head. "There's no Ministry trace on the spell, otherwise we'd already know it came from Harry's wand. Why not use your own and then Apparate?"

Arthur nods and looks around him. "Fan out," he orders. "If it's a child, or a criminal without a wand, he'll still be here."

Crouch steps forward. "Stand down," he orders, and the command in his tone stops the nascent investigation. "The criminal won't still be around."

"He might be, Barty," Arthur insists. "Percy's made a good point."

"Winky, did you see who used the wand?" Crouch says, turning to stare intently at his elf.

She hesitates; looks around; sobs a bit more, and then finally denies it. Percy, who has escaped detection more than once on a technicality, narrows his eyes at her.

She may not have *seen* something, but she may have heard it, or suspected someone.

But before he can say anything, Crouch takes charge, giving her clothes and dismissing her from his service. Winky's meltdown makes them all a bit ashamed, and after noticing Crouch's thunderous expression, Percy decides to question Winky later.

But there isn't a later. Crouch disappears without a word to Percy, holding Winky tightly in his hand. Diggory and Arthur have a conversation in low tones and then Arthur comes toward them, looking harried.

"Back to the tent," he says quietly.

"But Dad, what *was* that—"

"Not now, Ron," Arthur says, and his tone is so uncharacteristically serious that Ron snaps his mouth shut. Percy uses the silence as they walk back to the tent to think through the puzzle of today's events.

He hadn't remembered all of this, only that the Dark Mark was fired into the sky. He hadn't stayed for the entire Cup the last time, Apparating away after his shift had ended. Now,

though he's tired and more than a bit unsettled, his mind whirls, as always.

Who had organised this event? Pettigrew? It seems uncharacteristic for him, but if not he, then who? Lucius, perhaps? Unlikely; Lucius is not an idiot and would not risk detection at such a high profile event. Not to mention, Muggles whirling through the air hardly seems to match the other man's refined style. But Lucius is hardly the only ex-Death Eater to attend the World Cup.

It seems clear that the knowledge of the Dark Lord's return has begun to permeate the edges of society. Somebody had reason to celebrate, to contact the old gang. They had brought their cloaks. It wasn't spontaneous.

But, as his father explains back in the tent, the rest of the wizards had disappeared the moment the Mark was cast.

So why would they choose this summer, of all summers, to reunite—but disappear when their Mark shows in the sky?

Perhaps it was a signal, he muses as Arthur explains the history of the Dark Mark to Ron and the rest. His father and Crouch and the rest were within minutes of whoever cast the Mark. Maybe he who cast it was warning them to flee, their identities secure. Or perhaps someone further away would see the Mark and know to take some action.

If that were the case then the caster is not too important; it could have been any of the masked supporters. But again, why use Harry's wand? Who would Winky and Crouch protect?

Well, he supposes that he has no proof that Crouch is protecting anything except his own reputation. But Winky? Why would she try to lie?

"Percy?"

Percy starts and looks up. The younger kids have gone to sleep. Only Charlie, Bill, and their father are still in the small kitchen. Arthur looks tired, and Percy suddenly feels a burst of irritation well up inside him as he looks at his father's ratty old brown hat.

"I still don't understand why they'd use Harry's wand," Percy says as if continuing an argument he'd been having in his head with his father. "If I cast that spell right now, and then I cast a few others, you'd never know. Why bother stealing a wand—particularly *that* wand?

"Maybe just to sow chaos," Bill suggests. He passes a hand over his eyes. "The question I have is, why are the Death Eaters reuniting?"

Arthur looks grim. "There's reports of increased Muggle baiting. Maybe there's some sort of instigator, one of the old crowd riling the rest up."

"Or maybe it's been long enough for a new crowd," contributes Charlie.

"But why?" Bill shakes his head. "Don't they remember?" Percy had never spoken to him directly about it, but he wouldn't be surprised if Bill remembered quite a lot from the first war.

Arthur catches each of their eyes in turn. "Be safe," he says intently. "If something does happen...if people are trying to instigate trouble...anyone who sided on the other side will be targets."

"And since everyone knows we've all but adopted Harry, we'll be more targeted than most," Percy says dryly.

Arthur looks at him and Percy cannot shake the sense that his father is evaluating if Percy is saying that with rancour or pragmatism.

"Stay safe," he repeats firmly.

Percy nods obediently with the rest of his brothers. In his bunk, the sheets smelling unpleasantly of cats, he stares at the ceiling and thinks again about the mystery he cannot solve.

What is the chain of events? He must be *reasonable*, now. Harry loses his wand—and why *does* Harry lose his wand, the idiot, has nobody taught him a Sticking Charm?—and the culprit picks it up, and then Winky finds it? Or Winky finds it and the culprit steals it? What would be the culprit's plan had a wand not conveniently presented itself? Why does Winky pick up the wand at all?

There is an unknown actor here. Percy can only hope it proves to be as insignificant as it was last time.

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The Ministry the next day is buzzing, energetic, the threads of conversation overlapping and weaving into a tapestry of anxious curiosity. Everyone wants to ask Percy what happened, since everyone is too afraid to ask Crouch. Percy shrugs noncommittally and repeats over and over that he doesn't know who were wearing the masks, but the Aurors have been alerted.

Crouch walks in, face black, and Percy drops his eyes quickly to his parchment. The cup of tea he'd brewed for Crouch remains on his desk, steaming quietly. He'd had a vague idea of asking after Winky, but he values his career more than his curiosity, and interrupting Crouch when he is in this mood—even for a tea—is nothing short of dangerous.

In all honesty, it could have been any Death Eater causing mischief at the World Cup. Of course they could have used their own wand, but the opportunity to cast *Morsmordre* with Harry Potter's wand must have been too good to pass up. Winky could have been there merely by accident. It is all a bit *odd*, though, and Percy cannot help but wonder along with the rest, though he does so in the privacy of his own head rather than loudly in the hallways.

When Crouch assigns Percy to the Tournament, Percy just nods obediently and keeps his mouth shut. His boss will be dead by next summer; some wasting sickness, perhaps one that

feeds on magic? Percy is keeping an eye out but not too closely. He's changed events enough; he's hardly going to risk the plan to save Crouch.

"Weasley, you'll be my eyes and ears on the ground," Crouch says, just as he did last time, his stern face forbidding. "Notice everything; keep order; and report any misconduct to me at *once*."

"Yes, sir."

"Dumbledore'll be up to something, I'm sure of it," Crouch mutters. "And with Bertha Jorkins missing, Ludo won't be of any use at all. The man was never able to put his emotions aside and focus on what needs to be done."

"What do you think happened to Bertha, sir?" This is another mystery, albeit small, that Percy never solved.

Crouch shrugs, as if to convey that the location of a Ministry employee not in his department hardly concerns him. "She's a forgetful sort. She probably missed her Portkey and is wandering around somewhere; she'd said she was visiting Albania, if you can believe it."

Crouch, for all that he heads the Department of International Cooperation, does not seem to have any interest in leaving England. In this, though, Percy is of some agreement. Albania, of all places. Percy had met Bertha only once in each timeline, and both meetings had left him with the impression that she was as wholesome and British as they come. Percy can't imagine why she'd want to traipse around Albania.

But, her strange vacation plans were not his problem either, puzzling as they may be. Percy shakes Bertha from his mind and thinks instead of the Tournament.

Somebody—also an unknown actor, though this rather more consequential—puts Harry's name into the Goblet, which means that Percy will have to surveil it thoroughly. During the last timeline, Percy had avoided Hogwarts, due to the generally rancid air that hovered between him and his brothers. This time, he'll take every opportunity he has to be there, and Myrtle will be his eyes and ears while he strives to be Crouch's.

"Why were France and Bulgaria chosen, sir?"

Crouch sighs irritably. "A more relevant question is why Karkaroff and Maxime were interested. It was Karkaroff's idea, if I was correctly informed. He knows Krum will get chosen for the school, and probably win, too; he's probably been planning this since the boy was a first year. He asked Maxime because he knows she will take any opportunity to thrust Beauxbatons into the private eye."

Percy frowns. He heard very little of the French school the first time around. "Really?"

"Oh, certainly. She's a half-giant, did you know? Damned country put her in charge of a school. She's quite competitive with Dumbledore; Durmstrang bills itself as a school of Dark magic, so it's easy to get an assured and wealthy clientele. Maxime is hoping to get more of the UK market to come to France."

“Aren’t there schools in Spain and Italy as well?”

Crouch gives Percy a derisive glance. “One could barely call them schools,” he says, and without any further information Percy has to accept it as true. “No, she knows Hogwarts is her main competition.”

“We’ve not got many French students, though, or vice versa.”

“English money holds as true as French money, does it not? Anyway, they all have to learn French, if I’m not mistaken. Hardly thinks it matters to her.”

Percy has to wonder why he wasn’t given the chance to attend another school. Well, he knows the answer: Dumbledore, and tradition. Despite what Crouch is saying, Percy thinks it’s rather unlikely any of the British families he knows would consider sending their children abroad. Even the Malfoys, for all they despise Dumbledore, sent Draco to Hogwarts.

Hogwarts plays such a large role in the British psyche that leaving it would be rather *not done*. Even in job interviews years after graduation, one is asked for one’s House and graduation year. Percy has often felt the obsession with Hogwarts and one's House was a tad ridiculous, particularly for grown wizards who ought to have outgrown their schoolyard whimsies. Not to mention, given Hogwarts *is* going to be so prominent, why isn’t there a large public focus on ensuring it is better governed?

Percy supposes the laxity to his advantage; after all, if Dumbledore had any sort of handle on the goings-on of the school, his and Snape and Myrtle’s furtive quest would be out of the question.

***

August 1994

With a few weeks before he has to report at Hogwarts, Percy dives back into his research. It took him one entire week to move into and outfit his apartment, but the effort was well worth it. Oh, how *relaxing* it is to study in one’s own place! His desk is spacious and tasteful, his quills are—well, not custom made, but reasonably expensive, and he can go out and purchase whatever books he likes and nobody will stop him. How he’s missed adulthood. Suddenly the cozy, protective air of Hogwarts seems stifling. He misses McGonagall and Myrtle, but he’s not been alone, properly alone, in nearly a decade. He can make coffee from a French press and enchant the wireless to play relaxing music; he can wake early and eat in silence and read the newspaper without fear of disruption; and he can end the day with his Occlumency exercises, as familiar as an old friend.

Snape has the diadem, but Percy wants to have something when he returns to his old professor. The portrait, of course, looms over his head like a Dementor, ominous and silent, but Percy has to tell himself that despite his excitement, the probability of successfully

creating a portrait of Tom is slim to none. Better to find a way to discern the location of the other Horcruxes himself, as impossible of a mission as it may feel to him.

What would you have chosen? Percy asks the version of Tom that lurks in his memories.

He imagines Tom's proud tilt of his head, his imperious smile. ***Testaments to myself*****,** he whispers.

The other Founder's Artefacts are definite possibilities. The cup was mysteriously stolen, of course, but Percy in his research has found nothing of the locket. Percy writes to Horatio Smith to arrange a time to talk about his mother.

But even if *both* of those were Horcruxes—and why would Tom pervert Slytherin's own locket?—that still leaves two unknown objects.

So.

Tom likes trophies; he likes irony, he likes secrets, he likes puzzles. There must be a pattern. A apprenticeship journal, a symbol of how the Wizarding world spurned his academic potential; the diadem of Ravenclaw left to rot, a testament to Tom's superior wisdom. It seems too *easy*, somehow, merely to go for the other Founder's Artefacts, though of course Percy notes those down. What else would be meaningful to Tom?

Something from his home—either the orphanage, or perhaps his blood family on either side. Were there any Gaunt heirlooms? Any Riddle heirlooms? Percy still does not know much about Tom Riddle, Sr., though he knows quite a bit about Merope Gaunt. Do Muggles have heirlooms? Turning a Muggle object, perhaps some sort of crown or something (do Muggles still wear crowns?) into a piece of Tom's immortal soul is the type of irony that would appeal to Tom, though perhaps the inferiority of a Muggle object would be insulting.

The Gaunts would have something to bequeath to an heir, surely. Maybe they had the locket, and gave that to Tom? But again, Percy has a hard time believing Tom would intentionally corrupt Slytherin's locket, of all things. Maybe they had something else, an old family wand or a chest, something with sentimental value that the family couldn't have pawned off for much money. A signet ring, perhaps, or a goblin-made tiara.

He'll have to find where the Gaunts lived, though he's not quite sure how to go about doing that. Ditto for the Riddles.

The orphanage, perhaps. Maybe a book of records, or some sort of birth stone. (Percy doesn't know much about what objects an orphanage may have in store). He enlists Tonks, the senior, on the premise that a Muggleborn might be able to help him find a Muggle orphanage. Ted isn't *too* helpful, though he leads Percy toward the Muggle National Archives. He wishes he'd asked Tom where he'd spent his summers; the only thing Tom had mentioned was that the other children were nasty and he'd hated the home, wherever it was.

Perhaps he needs to think about the locations not in terms of the objects they have but the objects they could *hide*. Would Tom conceal a Horcrux, whatever it is, at the orphanage? At his father's house? His uncle's?

The question Percy cannot resolve is this: would he choose objects and locations that elevate him and are meaningful to him—Hogwarts, Malfoy Manor, a diadem—or ones that are cruel jokes, like a Muggle heirloom or his hated orphanage?

Percy feels instinctively as though it is the former, but he cannot entirely rule out the latter, either. He'll have to make some lists. Perhaps he can work out an Arithmancy calculation to wrangle with the probabilities.

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September 1994

When he returns to Hogwarts, for what is technically the fourth time, he expects to feel strange. The second time, when he'd been an aid to Crouch the first time, he'd felt odd, seeing his old classmates and professors, walking through familiar halls as a graduate.

This time, he doesn't romanticise the nostalgia; Crouch quickly abandons him, moving to discuss logistics with the other organisers, and Percy takes advantage of his solitude and takes quick, sure steps toward Snape's office. He's left Snape with the Map, but this is one route Percy knows well.

"You're late," Snape says, ushering him in. "Supper is soon, and I shall have to be there when Albus reveals the *Goblet of Fire*."

The derision in his voice makes Percy grin, though he looks down to hide it. "I've begun working on the portrait, but it will be a lengthy process," he admits. Better to pre-empt Snape's inevitable derision. "I am not yet of the required skill to paint it, though I am practising. In the meantime, I intend to look into the Gaunt family more carefully, to see if perhaps they had an artefact from their family Tom would have wanted to use."

Snape nods brusquely. "I believe the diadem may be sufficient, if we are forced to use it for the potion. The Horcrux seems to be strong and active, though I have of course not tested it since your departure. Albus has taken the diary and seems to recognise it for what it was, though he has not seen it fit to inform me of his suspicions."

Percy hears the edge in Snape's voice and changes the subject abruptly. "Shall we try the diadem once more?"

"So eager to be humiliated?" purrs Snape.

"I think we ought to not wear it, after this attempt," persists Percy. "But I would like to see if it has *strengthened*, given that it has been around your magic for several months."

"I have not worn it."

"Do you think the diadem needs to be interacted with, to activate it?"

Snape takes the diadem out from the drawer in his desk and lays it between them. “I believe so,” he says. “It has similar properties to other magical objects that lay dormant. Similarly to the Sorting Hat, which is activated only when it comes into contact with another’s magic, the diadem does not exude magic when it is not worn. Look at this.”

They examine the output from the spell together, and Percy has to admit that, while there is clearly a swirl of magic settled on the gleaming silver lines of the diadem, the diagnostic spell does not indicate that the diadem is magically *active*.

“I wonder why it needs another’s magic,” Percy muses. He supposes the diary must have been the same way. After all, it never initiated conversation; it only responded to Percy. “Perhaps it *is* like Occlumency.”

“In what way?” Snape asks, and to Percy’s surprise, the other man’s voice is not even disdainful, merely interested.

Percy hastens to explain. “Well, Occlumency is magic of the mind, but it requires us to use our magic to transform our mental defences into a physical cast. Without our magic powering that transformation, we would never be able to see our mind defences—or, I would wager, penetrate others’. I believe it may be similar for the Horcrux. Only with magic does the soul activate.”

“But it uses our magic, rather than its own.”

“I have always thought there is a soul-magic duality,” Percy admits, a bit sheepishly, for he does not have any strong proof for this theory. “I believe they are different. Souls are not inherently magical, or at least not in the same way as our magical core. I do not think the Horcrux necessarily has a store of magic on which to draw.”

“So the act of creating a Horcrux would have to imbue it with enough magic to protect it, but the soul fragment itself does not have its own magic,” Snape muses to himself. “Which would imply the Horcrux *vessel* must be a magical object; it cannot merely be an inert item. The diary must have been enchanted prior to the Dark Lord using it as a Horcrux.”

Percy nods. “So we must look for magical objects.” Certainly that would narrow their search.

Snape motions to the diadem. “Shall we get this farce over with for the day?”

The diadem produces Fred to torment Percy today, and the sight of his younger brother’s usually mischievous face twisted into a snarl of hatred upsets his stomach. Percy can barely stand to ask Fred for help, and he does not protest when Snape silently levitates the diadem off of his head.

“Why do you feel so responsible for your brother’s death?” Snape asks abruptly, settling the diadem back into its drawer.

Percy bristles, but then forces himself to relax, the prick of embarrassment over last year’s meltdown still potent. “I distracted him,” he admits, his voice soft. “He died laughing at me.”

“That is hardly your fault,” Snape points out with his usual bluntness. “Sending yourself backward in time over a decade seems like a…disproportionate reaction.”

Percy smiles without humour. “It wasn’t just Fred, although that was the most visible of my failures,” he explains flatly. “I *abandoned* them, Snape. I broke my mother’s heart. I did nothing as dozens of Muggleborns were sent to their death. Fred died; George lost an ear; Bill practically became a werewolf; and Ron and Ginny were never the same, not really.”

“And had you followed Dumbledore, you may have prevented those wrongs?” Snape inquires academically.

Percy gives an uncomfortable shrug. “Perhaps not by following *Dumbledore*, but by…” he trails off, and then attempts futilely to explain again. “By not abandoning them.”

Snape shakes his head, his long greasy hair swaying from the motion. “But as I understand it, you helped them with the Final Battle. Some may say that you showed great courage to change sides when all hope seemed lost.”

“It was only because all hope seemed lost that I was able to change sides,” admits Percy in a tiny voice. “I suppose that doesn’t really make much sense.”

Snape exhales slowly through his nose. Percy looks up and sees, to his surprise, something approaching agreement in the other man’s dark, fathomless eyes. “I understand,” Snape admits, his voice also quiet, as if he did not want anyone besides Percy to hear.

Percy hesitates and then dares, “Why do you feel responsible for Lily’s death?”

Something slides behind Snape’s eyes, and his face abruptly closes off. “I was a Death Eater,” Snape says by way of explanation. “I am responsible for many deaths, but hers was…”

Percy nods in understanding, though he can’t help but think that there is more to the story.

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Percy sits with Crouch at the end of the Head Table. He's not sure his brothers have noticed him; Harry is looking pale and wan, whispering something urgently to Ron, and Fred and George have their heads similarly bent together with Lee.

Next to Crouch is Mad-Eye Moody, sitting where Lupin had sat the previous year. Interesting choice for a Defence professor. He is an Auror, but he's rather mad. Seeing Moody reminds Percy of Tonks; she must have been assigned a new mentor. He'll have to drop in on her next week and ask how it's going. (The thrill: they all work in the same place, now. He can drop in on her if he likes).

He's allowed mulled wine with his supper, something the House tables never offer. It's quite good, actually. Even the food tastes better up here.

"Sir, if I wanted to check in on Bertha, how would I do so?" Percy asks Crouch in an undertone.

Crouch starts at the question. "And why would you do that?"

Percy shrugs. "I'd like to be of service, sir. Rotten luck if she's wandering around lost in another country."

Crouch takes a gulp from his glass. "Well, you're not to leave the United Kingdom; I need you here, Weasley. But you can ask around, I suppose. Don't let it interfere with your work. I don't pay you to investigate foolish employees who can't tell South from East."

Percy drops it. He'll have to investigate behind Crouch's back; he needs Crouch to give him a good recommendation (or, if he dies first, perhaps his superior) so Percy can get his old job back with Scrimgeour. It's probably nothing, anyway.

Finally, finally, it is time for the reveal of the Goblet. Percy hadn't been here the first time; Crouch hadn't enlisted him to visit Hogwarts until his health had faded more significantly. Dumbledore reveals the Goblet, and Percy instantly itches to examine it. It's a *binding magical contract.* How is it a binding magical contract? This would be *exactly* aligned with his research proposal.

(From further down the table, McGonagall catches his eye meaningfully).

Fred and George are certainly going to try and enter, Percy notes after their outburst. He'll be interested to see whether Dumbledore relies on the Goblet's ability to protect itself against invalid submissions, or whether the Age Line he speaks of will be the only guard. He hopes for his sake that the professors will be able to prevent underage wizards (aside from Harry, he supposes) from entering; he does not fancy having to grapple with the task of keeping Fred or George alive through a Tournament designed to test the mettle of adult wizards.

After supper, Percy says his goodbyes to Crouch, promises to visit McGonagall in the morning, and then goes to Myrtle.

"You're back!" Myrtle says delightedly. "Did you *see* the Goblet, Percy? That's what I'm meant to guard?"

"Somebody puts Harry's name in," Percy confirms. "We've got to see who."

Myrtle nods slowly. "How does he trick the protections? Whoever he is."

Percy purses his lips. "Shall we take a look?"

They make their quiet way back to the Great Hall. Now that Percy is a *graduate,* he need not worry about curfew, though he does slip through a side entrance into the hall. No point announcing to the world what he's doing.

He and Myrtle circle the Goblet, both struck dumb by the quiet majesty of its old stone.

"So you submit your full name," Myrtle says quietly, her voice echoing through the hallway. "That must be like signing your name at the bottom of a document."

"But where are the terms?" There are markings along the side of the bowl, but if they are in runes they are so ancient that they are not even taught in Ancient Runes. "Contracts need terms. To bind with magic would require a substance to do the binding, some sort of sample of the signee, so to speak, and a set of *terms* known in advance."

"Always the scholar, Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore says from behind him.

Percy jumps, turns, and squashes the ridiculous urge to bow. "Headmaster," he says, panicky. "We were just examining the Goblet."

"Yes, Minerva rather thought you might," Dumbledore says serenely. "Fascinating artefact, wouldn't you agree? We don't know from where it originated; as I'm sure you noticed, we cannot read these runes either."

"Then how do we know what, exactly, each contestant binds themselves to?"

"To be honest, we don't entirely know," Dumbledore says. Percy looks at him in surprise and he smiles, delighted. "Yes, one of magic's little surprises. The Tournament has been held for centuries; we have all of the old records, and we know that whoever's name comes out of that Goblet is bound to compete in all challenges."

"Someone must have refused," Percy infers.

Dumbledore inclines his head gravely. "Quite. She lost her magic and nearly her life. But besides that, I'm afraid we don't have much knowledge."

"Headmaster, forgive me if this is rude, but why…" Percy trails off awkwardly in the face of Dumbledore's incessant twinkle.

"Why host the Tournament?" Dumbledore sighs heavily and looks around him. "Mr. Weasley, as we last discussed, signs indicate a disturbance is yet to come. If it returns, it will not be content with merely Scotland or England."

"You hope this will win you allies," Percy completes. "But sir, someone could die!"

"I don't believe that shall happen," Dumbledore says sharply. "All the challenges will be within the purview of a seventh year student. In the meanwhile, I must ask, Mr. Weasley; is there anything you have gleaned in your short months of employment that may be useful to us?"

Percy thinks about this. There's Bertha, but if she is somehow involved in Pettigrew's plot, Percy can't ruin it—yet.

"No sir, but I've only begun to get responsibility," he says politely instead. "I imagine over the course of this year I shall hear something."

Dumbledore sighs and releases him, stepping back with a swirl of his colourful robes. "Shall I escort you to your chambers? I imagine it will be odd, not sleeping in Gryffindor Tower. Goodnight, dear Myrtle."

Myrtle starts guiltily and then dives through the floor. With no choice, Percy follows Dumbledore in silence to the guest chambers at Hogwarts.

At the door, Dumbledore turns and faces Percy once more. "There is danger afoot," he says deliberately. "We will need any help we can get, Mr. Weasley."

Percy holds his gaze for a long moment and then ducks into his room.

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The work he's assigned the following week is rather interesting, actually. Crouch tasks him with writing up reports on Karkaroff and Maxime, something he certainly wasn't asked to do the first time. He looks at the crane that flutters down to his desk but can find no hint in the curt words: *Compile reports on the other schools' headmasters. - C*

The first time around, Crouch didn't really communicate with him with the magic birds that make up the inter-department communication pipeline of the Ministry. He'd been at work more often than not, typically staying late, hunched over his desk. Percy hadn't wondered at the time but he does now: who does Crouch have at home for him? A wife, a child? Technically, Crouch *is* tangentially related to him, though the exact family tree escapes him at the moment.

In this timeline, Crouch is either locked in his office, the doors shut, the blinds drawn, or working from home. Either way, communication with Percy occurs largely through small white cranes.

Igor Karkaroff, former Death Eater, somehow implausibly became Headmaster of Durmstrang. Percy reads the reports of the trial, lingering over his transcript, wherein he names Snape as Death Eater without a shadow of hesitation. Was Karkaroff too a spy, or merely spineless, desperate to save his own skin? Had he become a Death Eater last time? Maybe Karkaroff is his mysterious actor; Percy will have to tip off Myrtle.

There are some reports of parents withdrawing their children from the school during Karkaroff's tenure, but overall his murky past does not seem to hold back his career.

Less is known about Olympe Maxime. He finds nothing in the official records about her status as half-giant, though Crouch had seemed rather sure of himself. Born and educated in France, she seems to be a respected Headmistress, though Percy does notice that tuition seems to have skyrocketed significantly during her reign.

"Hey, Percival, coming to lunch?"

Percy looks up and grins to see Tonks, spinning her wand as she leans against his door. Liam, one of the other junior assistants, looks up from his desk and eyes her appreciatively. When Tonks winks at him, he goes red and returns to his papers.

Percy rolls his eyes and gathers his things. “Coming, Nymphadora,” he responds, falling into step beside her as they walk through the Ministry to the cafeteria. It still gives him a bit of a thrill, the importance of the adult daily routine, the idea that one can meet one’s coworker for lunch at the caf. He feels inducted neatly into this partnership of tired government employees, all conversant in the language of *my manager said* and *are layoffs coming?* and *no, use eagles for urgent business, the cranes are for everyday notes*. Bureaucracy is a wonderful thing sometimes.

“Welcome to the Ministry,” Tonks says grandly, gesturing to the wide and open cafeteria. Percy has always liked this room, actually, preferring it to the Great Hall. He likes the small, round tables, the large windows with enchanted sun streaming through. He even likes the food, reassuringly normal, sandwiches and salads and pastas and roasts, all single-serving, all neatly wrapped and labelled.

“Been here nearly two months,” Percy responds self-importantly, paying for his things with a jingle of Sickles. It reminds him; he needs to ask the goblins, next he goes to Gringotts, if they will break some of his large pieces of gold into usable currency. He’s done it before, but after he thought about it more, he was fairly certain they charged him an obscene exchange rate.

Tonks shrugs, paying for her sandwich and hot tea. They find a quiet table in the corner and sit, tapping their wands to unwrap their chosen meals. “Well, since you’ve not come to see me, I don’t believe you.”

Percy waves his hand to dismiss this and then asks the question he’s been wondering for the past few days. “Tonks, who is your mentor now that Moody is gone?”

She eyes him suspiciously. “Who told you that Moody was gone?”

“What? I just saw him at Hogwarts, Monday last. He’s the new DADA professor.”

It’s Tonks’ turn to gape at Percy. “What? But he’s been kidnapped.”

“What?”

They look at each other, bewildered. Percy takes a fortifying bite of his salad. How tasteless it is; how reassuring. “I saw him,” Percy begins again, slowly and clearly. “At Hogwarts, last Monday. The first day of term.”

“Last Sunday, he escaped an assassination attempt,” Tonks says, equally slowly and clearly. “Or some type of attack. He’s not contacted me for the past week.”

“He’s at Hogwarts.”

Tonks' eyes narrow again. "Not like him to not write," she mutters to herself. "Unless it's a test. Maybe I'm meant to investigate; he wants to know if I'm going after him. Maybe I'm meant to determine if it's him, or an *imposter*."

"Or maybe," Percy interjects. "He's taken on a new position and not told his lowly assistant. He was talking to Dumbledore at the feast." Percy pauses, thinking of Dumbledore. "He seemed worried. Maybe he wants extra protection at the school."

'I'm a fully fledged Auror," Tonks says indignantly, her hair flaring yellow. "Moody would tell me if he took on a new position, or if he thought there was danger afoot at Hogwarts."

"You should write to him," Percy suggests. He's never met Moody, so he can't say whether Moody would, in fact, confide those sorts of things to Tonks. "You all must have some sort of —code, something to determine each other's identity."

Tonks' expression clears and she grins at Percy. "Excellent idea," she says, digging in her bag for some parchment. "I'll do it right now. This *is* a test, mark my words."

"Don't do it now," Percy scolds. "For one, we're having lunch. For another, I've one more question for you. Do you know Bertha Jorkins?"

"No, I don't think so," Tonks replies thoughtfully. She winks at Percy. "Trying to ask her out?"

Percy instantly turns red. "Of course not!"

"Then why are you asking?"

"She's disappeared, in Albania," Percy says. "Bit mysterious. Wondering if you *Auror types* had any classified information."

Tonks taps the side of her nose. "If we did, I'd hardly tell you. But I could take a look; I've a light afternoon. Maybe it's all part of the test, you know. Constant vigilance."

Percy rolls his eyes. "Moody's made you as mad as he." Aurors; always seeing a conspiracy in everything. Not a career Percy would ever consider.

***

That Saturday is Percy's meeting with Horatio Smith. He dresses in his very best robes; if Smith truly is a descendent of Hufflepuff, he's sure to be a bit grand.

They meet at *A Single Blade,* the same upscale café at which Percy once met the Malfoys. He hopes it's appropriate; Percy doesn't know very many fancy meeting places.

Smith *is* a bit grand; he's wearing loud yellow and black robes. Percy almost expects to see a badger emblazoned on the back. He has short blond, curly hair and a thin, pointed face, and before he sees Percy, Percy sees him snap irritably at a waiter that his tea is merely lukewarm.

Percy smoothes his robes down and then walks to the table, his shoulders thrown back.

"Mr. Smith," he says, holding out his hand. "Percy Weasley-Prewett."

Smith takes his hand lightly; his own is cold and clammy. "Charmed," he says, inclining his head. "Please, sit."

Percy sits and the poor waiter appears at once. "Tea, sir?"

Percy orders English breakfast and a blueberry scone. As soon as the waiter leaves, he regrets his choice, thinking through the logistics of eating a scone without crumbling it all over his nice robes. He needs to ask Landon, when he next writes to him: what exactly does one order at these types of events? What light snack is the easiest to eat?

(Smith has ordered a cup of fruit, which does not strike Percy as particularly refined, though he does have the advantage of using his fork to spear each half grape and cut strawberry individually).

"Now," Smith says, as soon as the waiter disappears. "You wrote to me, years ago, about my mother's cup."

"Yes," Percy says. He reaches into his satchel—dragonhide leather, purchased yesterday—and withdraws a scroll he's prepared. He unrolls it and passes it to Smith. He's copied out his notes in his neatest handwriting, even tracing over a diagram of the cup. It has notes on the cup's history, on the Smith family, and even a newspaper clipping of Madam Smith's death.

He wants to seem serious and prepared.

Smith flips through it, looking impressed. "You have done your research," he comments, before looking up. "Trying to find it for yourself, is it? Only *heirs* of the family may use it, you know."

Percy blinks and tries to recover. "No, I'm not trying to find it for myself," he says, before repeating the lie he'd settled on before. "I'm completing an apprenticeship with Professor McGonagall at Hogwarts, and we're hoping to include a section on the Founder's Artefacts."

"I heard you were working for Mr. Crouch at the Ministry," Smith says coolly.

Percy has never been *investigated* before. "I am," he says quickly. "But I'm continuing correspondence with Professor McGonagall. You can ask her, if you like. I'm trying to get some experience with the Ministry before I consign the rest of my life to academia."

Smith considers this. Percy's own palms begin to be a bit clammy; he hopes Smith doesn't write to McGonagall. Percy hadn't thought anyone would look him up. (It's a bit of a thrill, if he's being honest).

“The cup was in my family for many generations,” Smith says finally. Perhaps he’s decided to trust Percy; perhaps he’s just so desperate for someone to talk to about his story. “We’re the only known heirs to the Hufflepuff family, you know. Heidi Hufflepuff, only child, married Thomas Smith and bore him a son.”

From Hufflepuff to Smith. Despite the Fat Friar’s admonition all those years ago, Percy cannot help but feel a frisson of doubt, or at least disparagement.

“We guarded the cup, and if my ancestors used it, they never recorded it,” Smith continues dreamily, his eyes alight and clearly in the past. “My mother used to keep it in a glass cupboard. She never really believed in its powers; she thought it was just a pretty heirloom. I knew, though, and I waited for my chance to be its master.”

“It produces potions?”

“It enhances whatever you put inside,” Smith corrects. “A simple healing potion, drunk from the cup, will fix ailments you may not even know you have. A berry, placed inside, will be as filling as a full meal.”

Percy hadn’t heard this version, but he supposes Smith would know, better than most. “That sounds wonderful,” Percy says politely.

“It is,” Smith confirms. “Lady Hufflepuff was kind and selfless; she did not want to create something that would harm. She made something that would *nourish*. Imagine!” He spears a berry from his fruit cup and eats it meditatively.

Percy smiles politely. “And someone stole it from your mother,” he prompts, when Smith seems content to think about the many wonders of Lady Hufflepuff instead of continuing the conversation.

Smith’s entire face twists into a scowl. “They said it was *Hokey*,” he says, shaking his head. “They said Hokey misplaced her sugar for poison. Nobody asked why there would be poison in the kitchen in the first place.”

“So you suspect foul play.”

“The foulest,” Smith hisses, clenching his fork in his fist. “The Imperius Curse on poor Hokey. She *doted* on my mother, Mr. Weasley. She never would have harmed her, purposefully or not.”

“Who had motive to kill your mother?”

Smith laughs incredulously. “Anyone who wanted the cup,” he exclaims. “My mother made no secret of her treasures, though she could be rather secretive about what exactly she had. She’d casually bring them out during meetings, just to impress whoever was over for tea. Oh, she had all sorts of treasures: necklaces and lockets and amulets, crowns and tiaras and earrings, cups and chalices and goblets. Anyone who saw the cup and believed the old legends could have stolen it.”

“Where is her collection now?” Percy asks, leaning forward, his ears pricked at the word *locket*.

Smith shrugs. “We’ve kept as much as we can intact. She sold some pieces before her death to some wealthy collectors, I think.”

“Borgin and Burke’s?” Percy asks carefully.

Smith purses his lips, considering. “Perhaps,” he says slowly. “They certainly were interested. This one shopboy kept coming around, right before my mother died; I remember him, though of course this was several decades ago, before you were even born. He was very handsome and charming, but I never liked him much. My mother loved him, of course. But I don’t know if she ever sold any of her things. We didn’t need the money, you see.”

“Do you now?”

Smith sniffs powerfully. “I do not know what you are implying, Mr. Weasley.”

Percy backtracks quickly. “May I see the rest of the collection?”

Smith stiffens and sits back in his chair. “I shall send you a photograph,” he says, busying himself with his fruit again. (Percy’s scone remains untouched). “I don’t allow anyone to see it, not anymore. I don’t want to be poisoned.”

“Of course,” says Percy, taken aback. “Thank you. Er—whatever happened to Hokey?”

“She lived for a while,” Smith says darkly. “Died of grief, I think. Wasn’t much use after she learned she’d been accused of murdering her mistress.”

Percy nods slowly, taking a sip of his tea. Perhaps Tom did steal the cup and murder Madam Smith. He may have turned the cup into a Horcrux, or just used it for his own purposes. Where would it be now?

“Have you ever seen Slytherin’s locket, sir?”

Smith hesitates before shaking his head. “No,” he says. “I’d imagine that lies with whomever has the misfortune to be the heir of Slytherin.”

Perhaps Percy should just assume that Tom found the locket, too. Likely it was in the Chamber of Secrets. Still, it begs the question: what would the other two Horcruxes be? And where would Tom hide these treasures?

Smith takes his leave a few minutes later, having finished all the fruit. Percy waits until he’s out of the café and then spreads his napkin over his lap, biting into the scone delicately in a fruitless effort to avoid spilling crumbs. Definitely not the right thing to order, though it is delicious.

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He feels energised with purpose until Friday night, at which point he goes home, makes an early supper, puts on some soft, classical music, and then takes out a crisp sheet of paper, a piece of hard, grey charcoal, and the dossier that he had compiled on Tom, all those years ago. It includes photographs, copied from old Hogwarts records. Percy picks up the photo that had caught his interest originally, Tom lounging arrogantly, raising his cold eyes to meet Percy's as the boys around him laugh.

He pins that one to his desk. Tom is seventeen. He looks a bit older than the diary-Tom, his face harder and more angular.

Percy will need to try and determine at what age Tom made the diadem a Horcrux. He was approximately fifty when he killed Harry's parents, though Percy has trouble picturing Tom as anything other than young and imperious.

His good mood deserts him as swiftly as it had come.

What is he *thinking*?

The very first step to this mad plan; the necessary prerequisite, in fact, is that Percy has to skillfully and accurately paint Tom. Like a boy dreaming of himself on the Wasps after one year of Quidditch lessons, Percy's spent the week imagining his triumph after completing only immature projects.

Tom's face is *complicated*, and he'll have to get it as right as possible for the potion to take hold. He's not yet gotten a more specific version of the recipe, but he's spent the week looking intently into the theory, and he knows that accuracy is essential. There have been cases of revision, of Lords and Ladies demanding their faces be thinner, their chins more refined. Then when the portrait wakes, they feel as though something is wrong. It can drive the portrait mad, depending on how egregious the corrections are.

It's better to pick a background that is familiar to the subject, and include items that represent important moments or character traits. For Tom, Percy can picture him best hand stretched to touch the basilisk, shining against the cavernous grey walls, but he's not sure that's the best choice for background. And for *accoutrements*? Tom played no sports, joined no clubs. The only thing he devoted himself to was magic and power.

First steps first, Percy reminds himself, as he's done so many times.

He starts by looking at the photograph for a long time. Portraits can technically be of any age, as long as it is younger than the age of death, but the painter risked the subject losing subsequent memories if painted too young.

He will have to ask the Grey Lady exactly when Tom made the diadem, or at least her best guess. Then he'll have to get some reference; maybe a memory, though the thought of asking Snape for a memory fills him with dread.

But people don't change, not really. Percy has learned this, watching his face in the mirror grow again from child to adult. There's always been a sense of self in his image, something that ties him together, even as his face thinned and his hair changed texture slightly and his shoulders filled out.

Tom's eyes, for instance. They will always be that impenetrable blue, or at least until they turn red. The imperious set to his chin, his surprisingly delicate mouth. The way his left eyebrow is always infinitesimally higher than the right, the effect of which is to make the recipient always feel a bit unsure of himself.

He begins to sketch, looking at the hard angles of Tom's face. As he focuses on the lines of his nose and the bow of his lip, he asks him, *Will you thank me for this?*

I thank nobody, he imagines Tom replying.

I'm helping you live forever, in a way.

As he works his way out, outlining the curve of Tom's cheeks, shading his hair, he remembers Myrtle, peering at him in the air. *Will you be able to murder him, when you need to?*

"Yes," Percy says out loud, looking at the face beginning to take shape on the page. He will, once he can figure Tom out.

There's a pattern here; he can sense it. The diary—an apprenticeship journal, bought for himself by himself—represents the echelons of scholarship and society that Tom felt excluded from. Hidden, appropriately, with Abraxas Malfoy, the most beautiful and privileged of Tom's friends.

The diadem, wisdom itself, hidden in Hogwarts, the place where Tom learned of his own power and knowledge.

Whatever heirloom of the Gaunts he uses will be hidden at the Gaunt estate, most likely. Whatever object he uses to represent conquering his miserable childhood will be at the orphanage, likely corrupting generations of Muggle children.

The cup and locket just don't make sense to Percy, not really. What does the cup represent: nourishment, according to Smith. Hufflepuff's pragmatism and kindness. Why would that be meaningful to Tom?

Perhaps he, like Percy, never had enough. Maybe that is what is at the orphanage: a magic artefact that could feed all of the starving children, if only they were magic, like Tom. That makes sense to Percy, and he can see it making sense to Tom.

And the locket? As best as Percy can tell, which is not very well, the locket is an amulet of protection. Why corrupt it for a Horcrux? Tom, as heir, could just wear the locket and command it.

Tom was rejected from Hogwarts, in a way. He was rejected from society and rejected from wisdom. What did he conquer?

He conquered all those boys, those pureblood boys that knelt in the dirt at his feet. What represents *pureblood* to Tom? A watch, perhaps, the gift all men are given on their seventeenth birthday. A Gringotts vault key? A contract, maybe, or whatever signifies the Wizengamot seat traditionally bequeathed to the heir at age 33.

He conquered—or tried to—the Ministry. What could mean the Ministry? Percy can think of no symbols save the birds that flutter overhead. Maybe one is hidden there, at the bottom of the fountain, perhaps, or the ceiling of the atrium.

Maybe something that represents Dumbledore. Lemon drops. Half-moon glasses. Purple robes.

“You’re too complicated by half,” Percy tells the sketch of Tom, who continues to smile enigmatically from the page. This may be a foolhardy idea, but without Tom, there are just too many variables. Tom could have made anything a Horcrux.

(Percy remembers the list he’d made, one day, of thirteen things he’d make into a Horcrux. At the time, several of the objects had been decorative, like his Gryffindor class ring, or his Head Boy badge. Now, all he can think is that he’d make them as random and unobtrusive as possible: a moonstone, dropped into the bottom of a dark lake; a will, perhaps, kept in a safety deposit box at Gringotts; the clock on his wall. He would want to be as inscrutable and pragmatic as possible. Let his enemies examine the life of Percy Weasley and find no clues).

But Tom is not like Percy in one important way: he has an unquestionable confidence in himself. He would not be content to have items that are insignificant.

Percy shakes his head decisively and stands. He enchants the parchment to be blank and then scribbles over it: *it’s our only option; password is the year he graduated* and then tells Hermes to take it to Snape.

For now, he begins sketching Tom again, using the photographs as reference. Just in charcoal and drawing pencil, of course, though he will have to graduate eventually to paint. If he evaluates his skill dispassionately, he can admit that he's a rather adept sketcher, all things considered, but actually *painting* such a difficult subject will pose a larger challenge than any that Percy had to tackle previously. Not to mention he'll have to purchase the proper equipment and conduct some additional research on the portrait potion, to better understand whether the portrait would have the proper memories from Tom's life.

But first things first, and then the second.

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October 1994

Despite his best efforts, Percy cannot tell what property of the Marauder's Map would cause it to show Tom Riddle's name on his diary at the end of the year but not at the beginning. Theoretically, he supposes it makes sense: as the diary grew, so did the soul fragment, until it had enough strength to qualify. So does the Map show a soul strength, or a soul *amount*?

Maybe Horcruxes do not split the soul by fractional amounts but merely shave bits off the main soul each time, bits that can grow on their own. Maybe if he and Snape wear the diadem with enough frequency, the diadem would show too. If the diary and the diadem were both on the Map at the same time, would they show as two Tom Riddles?

Percy spends a few days looking into all location spells, like the Point Me charm. What he learns is that they track someone's magical signature. Interestingly, the spell requires the caster to have encountered the magical signature before. The person may not know they are familiar with the magical signature, but something in their magic remembers it. The more familiar they are with the target, the more accurate the spell.

So perhaps the Map tracks magical signature? Perhaps as the diary grew in strength, its magical signature became strong enough to qualify for the Map?

Percy's research into souls suggests that souls exist as something separate than magic, that magic is separate than blood, but that magic is inextricably linked to the blood in a way that seems separate from how it is tied to the soul. His current theory is that magic lives in the blood, is carried by it through one's body in the same mysterious way that blood moves through one's veins. Blood does not *power* magic, but transports it, and allows it to reach every centimetre of the body. Blood gives magic its initial physical cast, which can later be drawn upon through wandwork, through wandless casting. Magic is clearly physical; Percy can remember his own bouts of magical exhaustion very thoroughly. When he casts too much magic his heart beats quickly, and his muscles are fatigued, and blood pounds in his head like the worst of headaches.

But the soul seems to exist as something separate, as something inherently intangible, more like the mind than like blood.

So if the Map shows magic, then it would imply only that ghosts have more magic than portraits, which he supposes is an easier claim to back up than that ghosts have part of their souls still. He would be ready to concede defeat on his theory if it were not for everything *else* he'd learned about souls in the last eight years. Perhaps the Map shows only magic, but he cannot help but feel that Myrtle and the Fat Friar had been correct. The soul splits at death, and some remains in the ghost. Dementors take the entire soul, and leave the body alive with their magic and their blood but without their minds, and their victims can never come back as ghosts.

Perhaps people have soul signatures, as absurd as that sounds to him. Or perhaps he can take advantage of the resonance between the mind-soul and blood-magic connection. There *has* to be something he can do. There *has* to be a logical chain that he can build. He's just missing something, some connection, something that will be blindingly obvious once he finds it.

***

Percy next returns to Hogwarts on Halloween. He never liked Halloween, or Samhain as the old Wizarding families still call it. He'd asked Muriel once about whether the Prewetts celebrated, and she'd shuddered, downed her whiskey, and told him never to accept an invitation to anything on that night. He wonders if *this* invitation would count.

Hogwarts is done up in more decorations than usual; Percy eyes them curiously as he passes. Crouch is only coming tomorrow evening for the reading of the names, but Percy opted to come by in the morning. The other students are arriving promptly at six, so he has a few hours to meet with Snape and Myrtle.

Both are waiting for him in Snape's office. Percy once again reflects that it's far too easy for a stranger to walk into Hogwarts and get up to mischief. He had to pass through the wards, but Crouch had written him a pass, and the stern gargoyles at the gate accepted it without question. Not to mention there was the question of the private Floo; could he not Floo directly to Snape's office whenever he wished?

"Absolutely not," Snape says. "I have more wards on this fireplace than you'll ever see in your lifetime, even two of them."

"But it would be convenient," Percy presses. "We could send messages through the fireplace."

"Absolutely not," Snape repeats. "A small chink in one's armor becomes larger with every passing day. Where are your *enchanted notebooks*?"

Percy ignores the tone of derision smoothly. He had suggested enchanting paired notebooks, but Snape had immediately vetoed the idea, insinuating that Percy was missing his *penpal*. "I haven't begun working on them," he admits. Work has been busy; the number of international permits Percy had to process for tonight's event is quite ridiculous. Percy knows every Durmstrang and Beauxbatons' student by name after copying their personal information out in triplicate for an international tourist visa, an international student visa, a legal waiver in case of harm, *and* an authorization for the student to be healed by Hogwarts medical staff if and when it becomes necessary. Twelve forms each, and the second time he's filled them out in his lifetime.

"You never cease to amaze," Snape says dryly. "And of the cup?"

"Tom definitely stole it," Percy confirms. "A charismatic shopboy from Borgin and Burke's chatted up Madam Smith days before her suspicious death. I've brought photographs of the rest of the Smith collection; he refused to let me see it in person. There are some lockets, but none that seem to match the description of Slytherin's."

"I doubt she had Slytherin's locket," Snape says, perusing the photographs intently. "Likely it stayed with the heirs."

“The Gaunts.”

“Yes,” Snape confirms. “I imagine you are going to look into Morfin’s trial next? Perhaps we can visit their ancestral home.”

“I did look into it,” Percy says defensively. Then he concedes, “But I’ll look into it again. I wasn’t able to find where their home may be. Why do you think that he never claimed the name of Gaunt?”

Snape exhales noisily, shaking his head. “Honestly, Weasley, I could not say. To have a direct connection to Salazar Slytherin and not to claim it…”

They make eye contact, and the blink of understanding that passes between them is somehow more intimate than any other moment they’ve shared previously. Percy has begun to suspect that Snape too had a rather inauspicious background. Snape is not a wizarding name, but then again, perhaps beginning with a blank slate is better than starting one’s life under the mantle of *Weasley*. Both of them would claim their lineage if they could.

“Now, to more important news,” Snape says. “I believe Pettigrew has successfully made contact with the Dark Lord.”

“Did he write you another letter?”

"He's found him in Albania," Snape confirms, passing the letter to Percy, who scans it. Rather short, and jerky handwriting, as if composed by someone unused to holding a quill. "He wrote only that he is in poor health."

"And Bertha?" Percy hands the letter back to Snape, who secrets it away in his robes.

"He said very little," Snape says, shaking his head slightly. "As you know, very little can be said in a letter. But I think we can assume Bertha was involved, though I would imagine unwillingly. We know that the Dark Lord forms a plan around the Tournament; I think it likely that He learns of the Tournament from Bertha and then disposes of her.”

Percy shudders at the thought. Poor Bertha. "He may contact you Himself."

"He won't; he will not risk alerting Albus. He’s probably discovered I’ve cursed Pettigrew, so he hopefully is assured of my loyalty.” Snape pauses. “Weasley, you do know what this means,” Snape says, holding Percy’s eyes intently. “The Dark Lord has returned. Pettigrew used the word *We*, which suggests to me that he or the Dark Lord have begun to recruit more widely. Our clock has begun to tick.”

Percy swallows painfully but does not look away. “At least it seems to be occurring on schedule,” he says. “And we already have two of six Horcruxes.”

“There are no prizes here for battles half-won.”

“You are ready? To face Him?”

Snape gives Percy a searing glare. “We have no choice.”

Percy does not know exactly what happens at the conclusion of the Tournament. Fortunately, Fudge had not been particularly discreet when loudly disparaging Harry's story, so Percy—and many of his coworkers at the Ministry—had surmised the broad strokes of the evening. The Triwizard Cup allegedly was a portkey, though when Aurors examined it later, they found no evidence to support that claim. Harry and Cedric both touched the Cup at the same time (which Percy had privately doubted; why would either of them concede to the other?) and were whisked away to a mysterious graveyard, though Harry had not provided enough details for anyone to find said graveyard again. The Dark Lord, surrounded by society's finest, somehow came to life, taking blood from Harry and, most gruesomely, a hand from Pettigrew. Harry somehow escaped, though Cedric died.

At the time, this story had contained all the makings of a sordid little drama spun up by the Boy Who Lived to create sensational media appeal. Percy had felt there may be elements to the truth—for instance, Cedric *did* die in that horrid maze—but at the time he'd thought Harry had been confused, traumatised by the awful experience of being an underage Champion.

Now, Percy can only assume that Harry had been correct. Now, all he can do is hopelessly parse through his memories of the gossip from the original timeline, looking for clues. Had Fudge let anything else slip? Had Harry mentioned some clue, even obliquely, that would help Percy answer the questions that thrum in his head like the chirrups of a flock of nervous, twittering birds?

"Have you any additional idea what potion the Dark Lord may have used?"

Snape exhales through his large, crooked nose and shakes his head, the greasy locks of his hair falling into his face. "Theories," he says shortly. "But nothing concrete. We know only that He used blood and flesh; there are many such potions, and doubtless the Dark Lord knows many more."

Percy nods grimly. Things would have been easier had Harry done the correct thing and filed a report with the Ministry. Percy had checked in the previous timeline, curious for details, but had found nothing of use.

"In truth we cannot attempt to stop His resurrection," says Snape needlessly. Percy knows this all too well, but he knows Snape well enough by now to guess what the other man is saying.

Let Pettigrew and Tom, wherever they are, struggle their way back to life. Let them enchant the Portkey, let them kidnap Harry, let them brew a mysterious potion.

Snape and Percy's tasks lay elsewhere.

***

Percy, never having seen either school arrive the first time, is suitably awed both by the giant ship bobbing out of the water and the carriage with winged horses floating from the sky. It makes one wonder: if Hogwarts students were to go to France or Bulgaria, how would they travel? The Hogwarts Express?

The students are impressive too. Perhaps because each school only brought their seventh years, the fur-clad Durmstrang students seem tall and sturdy, while the Beauxbatons contingent seems as light and airy as the fae.

Percy, standing off to the side near McGonagall, eyes the huddled mass of Hogwarts students. Robes, standard; most not even wearing the proper hat; a motley crew, really.

He doesn't blame the foreigners for keeping to themselves during supper. The Durmstrang students are hailed eagerly by the Slytherin seventh year perfect, and though Draco, predictably, lands himself neatly next to Krum, most of them seem to speak among themselves. The Beauxbatons students pick Ravenclaw, probably due to the blue edging on their robes, but form a tightly closed formation at the edge of the table.

Dumbledore stands; Dumbledore gives a speech; the Goblet alights. In the shadow of the blue flames, Percy sees the blurry outline of Myrtle, hovering near the door.

After supper, Percy lingers near the Goblet. He's not alone. Barely anyone leaves the Great Hall. Krum is the first to work up the courage to submit his name: he strides over, drops a piece of paper, and then strides out without a backwards glance. Percy wonders if the Goblet takes eagerness into account. Shouldn't one submit an application of some sort? How does the Goblet determine worthiness without any access to the participant's magic or blood?

It's random, he thinks to himself.

If is *is* random, the best way to submit Harry would be as the only student of a fourth school.

As if Krum's bravery broke the ice, the rest of the Durmstrang students submit their names, followed by the Beauxbatons. Likely all of the students who agreed to come were planning on entering. Did that mean that the schools had *more* students, or that all the students were willing to enter?

The Trio lingers for a while, watching, but leave for bed eventually. Fred and George examine the Age Line carefully and then go off together, whispering. Percy would be willing to bet that they had some harebrained scheme to dodge the restriction. Percy watches Cedric enter his name; he wonders if he'll be chosen again, if whatever misfortune struck him down will strike anew.

Percy stays for as long as he can and then must depart, yawning. Myrtle nods at him as he passes.

It feels as though he's barely been asleep when his alarm wakes him. He passes a hand in front of his face before dragging himself out of bed.

In the Great Hall, it's more of the same. He doesn't want to risk speaking to Myrtle during her surveillance of the Goblet, so he lurks by the entrance to the Great Hall until Ron sees him and does a double take.

"Percy?"

"Hullo, Ron," Percy says politely.

"What—what are you doing here?"

Percy blinks. "Not very observant, are you?"

Hermione nods sagely. "He was here yesterday too."

"And once before, if you can believe it."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Ron demands.

Hermione scoffs. "Well, *someone* was too busy fawning over Krum—"

"Why are you here?" Harry asks abruptly. From up close, he looks even more wretched: dark circles like bruises under his eyes.

Percy tries not to react to Harry's tone. "Well, Crouch is too busy to keep *too* close an eye on the Tournament, so he's asked me to come by periodically and report back."

"What does the Ministry think is going to happen?"

Percy laughs. It sounds false even to his own ears. "Well, there's three sets of teenagers under one roof," he points out. "My Galleons are on an international incident occurring before the end of the term. Especially with Krum around; who knows what some of his fans may do. Maybe you should try to befriend him, Harry."

"Why Harry?" Ron says indignantly. "I could befriend him."

"Yes, if you're not too busy looking at him with stars in your eyes," Hermione says waspishly.

Percy ignores them, watching from afar as Fred and George approach the Goblet with some excitement.

"Do you think they'll enter me too?" Ron breathes longingly. "A thousand Galleons…"

Percy mentally tabulates the contents of his Gringotts vault. "A thousand Galleons isn't an insurmountable sum, Ron," he says absently, watching Fred and George.

With a bang, they're thrown across the room. When they get to their feet, there's two old men with matching grey beards.

The room explodes into laughter. Percy's lips twitch; at least this will be an effective deterrent.

***

The rest of the day passes without incident, except for one rather odd encounter with Crouch.

Crouch arrives just after four, giving him enough time to hear from Percy and meet with Dumbledore before the night's drawing. Percy gives his unfortunately short report concisely and clearly, but Crouch fails to respond, his watery eyes flicking around the Great Hall.

"Sir," says Percy cautiously. "Are you—feeling well?"

Crouch swings his eyes over to Percy. His gaze lands on Percy with such weight that Percy recoils automatically. His gaze is searching, somehow, and Percy has to tamper the urge to look behind him.

"Never better," he says forcefully.

"Sir?"

Crouch swings his arm to encompass the entire Great Hall. "This will launch both our careers, Percy."

Does the man know he's dying? Perhaps he's just been diagnosed with an illness; that would explain the manic attitude. No man could be unaffected when contemplating his imminent mortality.

"Yes, sir," Percy says neutrally. He turns back to his parchment. He had taken about one year of healing with Madam Pomfrey before giving it up; there wasn't a chance he'd be able to diagnose Crouch himself. Anyway, it was his business. What was done was done.

But besides Crouch's erratic behaviour, the true excitement comes from the evening. Percy watches intently as Krum, then Fleur, then Cedric are chosen for their schools. The flames change colours; they crackle and hiss; and the parchment shoots out, catapulted into the air.

With Harry, the process is the same. Flame, crackle, pop.

"Harry Potter," Dumbledore reads out. His voice is quiet, but the intensity carries it through the entire hall. Percy, like everyone else, zeros in on the Gryffindor table, where Harry is sitting, still holding his fork, looking absolutely nonplussed. More intently, Dumbledore repeats, "*Harry Potter.* "

Hermione gives Harry a shove. Ron, besides, has already flushed red, his freckles stark as his face twists into anger.

Harry walks awkwardly to the front of the room. His robes are untied, and they flap audibly over his Muggle trainers. The murmurs that break out behind him barely cover the sound.

By the time Harry makes it to the table, his chin is up, and his face is full of resolve. He looks like someone who has perhaps made a mistake but seems intent to stick to it nonetheless. Percy sees why people had believed he'd done it intentionally. When Harry looks like that, green eyes dark and mossy, his face set in determination, he looks purposeful.

Percy slips out and follows Crouch.

The back room is pandemonium, of course. Everyone is talking over each other; Snape is there, as is McGonagall, both arguing with each other and with the other Headmasters simultaneously. Cedric is looking at Harry with betrayal.

"Did you put your name in the Goblet of Fire, Harry?" Dumbledore asks calmly, as if the answer could hardly matter.

"No," Harry says defiantly. Snape scoffs audibly, and Harry scowls.

"Did you ask an older student to put it into the Goblet of Fire for you?"

"No," Harry says with more heat.

"Ah, but of course 'e is lying!" cries Madame Maxime.

Percy spares her only a cursory glance. He's looking intently at Karkaroff, trying to sense bad intent. He meets Snape's eyes as more argument continues. Snape doesn't think it's Karkaroff; He thinks his goal is so obviously for Krum to win that he wouldn't risk Harry's inclusion. Percy isn't so sure.

"Mr. Crouch…Mr. Bagman," says Karkaroff with an air of exaggerated politeness, "You are our - er - objective judges. Surely you will agree that this is most irregular?"

Percy starts; he hadn't even noticed Bagman. But Bagman says nothing, looking only to Crouch. In the flickering lights, Percy's boss looks worse than ever. His cheeks are cavernous, and the wrinkles on his face seem carved into his skin. But his eyes are alight with some of the wildness of earlier, and Percy swallows nervously.

"Rules are rules," Crouch says. "Harry Potter must compete."

This sets off an explosion that Percy listens to with half an ear. Snape's watching Crouch now too, frowning slightly. Crouch's devotion to the rules is, of course, legendary, but there's an undercurrent that Percy doesn't quite understand.

"Empty threat, Karkaroff," growls a new voice: Moody. "You can't leave your champion now. He's got to compete. They've all got to compete. Binding magical contract, like Dumbledore said. Convenient, eh?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," Karkaroff spits back. Percy notices his hands have curled into fists.

"Don't you?" says Moody quietly. "It's very simple, Karkaroff. Someone put Potter's name in that goblet knowing he'd have to compete if it came out."

Karkaroff doesn't react noticeably at these words, though Maxime explodes anew, followed by Percy's future sister in law.

The Champions, at least, have every right to be upset. What Percy doesn't understand is why nobody suggests that Harry just show up to the events and make a half-hearted effort. Can the Goblet somehow tell if he is putting his entire skill into it? He could dip a toe into the lake and stand by the water's edge for the whole hour. He doesn't *have* to compete; and he certainly doesn't have to try to win.

"Maybe someone's hoping Potter is going to die for it," Moody snaps back to Fleur.

The plot *is* rather obvious. Percy hadn't known that Moody had brought this up the first time. Why had Dumbledore done nothing?

Perhaps Dumbledore wants Harry to compete. Perhaps he is the one who enchanted the Goblet. Not to lead Harry to the Dark Lord, but to toughen up Harry, give him an incentive to study all year. Hadn't he learned enough to lead a Defence club the following year? Hadn't he held his own against dragons and Grindylows and whatever horrors were in that maze? Perhaps this situation had been of Dumbledore's making, and the Dark Lord had merely taken advantage of the opportunity.

Indeed, Dumbledore is staying very silent, watching to see how Harry responds. Harry is being particularly silent, which Percy thinks is rather odd for him. Maybe he was in on the plan too?

Or Moody is right, and Karkaroff did put Harry's name into the Goblet.

Percy muses it over as Dumbledore neatly disposes of the whole issue. He turns the attention back to Crouch, who straightens and looks at each Champion in turn.

"The first Task will test your daring," he tells Harry, Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor, his voice hoarse. "So we are not going to be telling you what it is. Courage in the face of the unknown is an important quality in a wizard…very important…"

Here Crouch trails off meditatively.

When it becomes apparent that Crouch isn't going to finish his sentence, Percy casts a concerned look at Bagman, who clears his throat and steps forward to inform the Champions of the date and time of the Task.

Even Dumbledore seems to have noticed. "Are you sure you do not want to stay tonight, Barty? The elves can clean another room within the hour."

Crouch shakes his head. "No, no, Weasley has it under control here," he says gruffly. "Need to oversee the Ministry."

Percy follows him and Bagman out, though he stays a few paces behind.

"Really, Barty, you're looking very peaky," Bagman says to Crouch.

Crouch gives Bagman a withering look that Percy can sense even from behind. "Focus on yourself, Ludo," he replies tightly. "We all have our own burdens to bear."

Percy lingers at the entryway, waiting to see if Crouch has any further instructions for him. Apparently not; the two men begin the winding walk to Hogsmeade without acknowledging Percy's presence.

Percy gives it thirty seconds and then goes immediately to Myrtle's bathroom. Snape is there, looking faintly disgusted at his surroundings. Percy walks in at the wrong moment and receives a full face of a cleaning charm, which is entirely unpleasant, though he supposes not entirely unwarranted.

"You're sure he did not enter himself?"

"Not *sure*," says Percy thoughtfully. "But he always maintained he didn't, and Moody was right: it's an incredibly complex magical artefact, there's no chance Harry could fool it."

Myrtle clears her throat pointedly. "Moody, the Durmstrang Headmaster, the Beauxbatons Headmistress, Dumbledore, Snape, McGonagall, and your boss, Percy, all visited the Goblet after the doors were closed."

Percy looks questioningly at Snape. "I was not able to tell if it had been tampered with," the man says stiffly.

Ruling out Snape and McGonagall, that created a list of suspects that narrowed it down to absolutely nobody.

"I think it could be Dumbledore," Percy says. "Giving Harry a chance to prove himself."

"That is precisely in line with something Albus would do," Snape agrees without even a hint of venom, to Percy's surprise. "But he seemed concerned when we spoke after you left."

"But he's not above lying to you."

Snape flicks his eyes briefly to Percy. "He does not lie to me about things such as these."

"*I* think it's Mad-Eye Moody," Myrtle says.

"Moody is…mad, but he is an Auror, and loyal to Dumbledore," refutes Snape.

"Karkaroff?"

"I have a hard time believing it of Karkaroff or Maxime. I believe both are concerned primarily with the success of their students."

Percy tweaks one of the faucets on The Sink, as he calls it in his head, and watches water trickle into the bowl. If Tom were still here; he'd have an opinion. He'd probably see what all three of them were missing now, some secret that was obvious if only one *looked*. Percy

prides himself on his observant and logical nature, but he has to admit that this mystery stymies him.

“I will see you at the First Task,” Snape says abruptly. “Do try to have some information on the Cup; I will investigate the Chamber when I have the time.”

He departs in a swirl of black robes. Percy continues to watch the water splutter against the rim of the drain. He doesn't think anything is in the Chamber; they'd found the diadem, and the Sorting Hat had said that would be the end of the Objects at Hogwarts.

“There’s a lot of time, now,” Myrtle says into the silence.

Percy is startled into a laugh. “I know exactly what you mean.”

They know of the Horcruxes; he’s recruited Snape; the Dark Lord has, in some way, already returned. But it’s the end of October and *nothing* of note has happened this year at all.

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On Monday, Percy knocks hesitantly on Crouch’s door at precisely eight o’clock in the morning. To his surprise, Crouch is actually in, and bids him to enter in a hoarse voice.

“I wish for you to make a report on werewolves and giants in Europe,” says Crouch without preamble. Percy notices the four separate cups of coffee on his desk and hopes, for Crouch’s sake, he isn’t trying to stave off an illness through caffeine and stimulant potions.

“Sir?”

Crouch moves aside a stack of parchment and picks up the top sheet of the next stack. “Werewolves and giants,” he repeats slowly, as if Percy is the one not making any sense. “I wish to have an idea of their relative population sizes and the strengths of their communities.”

“May I ask why, sir?” Crouch certainly had not asked Percy to investigate these populations in the first timeline, not that Percy can remember.

Crouch doesn’t look up from the parchment he is surveying. “Dark rumours, Weasley. If we are to defend ourselves, we must know our allies—and our enemies.”

Percy remembers what Snape had said, about Crouch’s obsessive desire to combat Dark Wizards. Last time, both the giants and werewolves had sided with the Dark Lord, as had the dementors. The goblins had remained neutral, which meant they essentially sided with the Dark Lord in the end, since the Death Eaters patrolled the bank’s steps.

“Do you think they are our allies or our enemies?”

Crouch finally looks at Percy, and in his gaze is something like grim humour. “Sounds like something we ought to find out, isn’t it?”

Percy returns to his desk, feeling discomfited. It is growing rapidly clear that something in this timeline has changed, that Crouch is *not* acting as he did before. He looks sickly and ill, that is for certain, but he is not behaving like a man soon to die. He’s acting like a man preparing for war, but how does he know war is coming?

Perhaps, Percy realises with a dawning horror, Crouch *killed* himself in the last timeline. Perhaps he tried to stop the Dark Lord’s return and realised somehow that he failed. Or maybe he didn't kill himself, and he ran into Pettigrew, and Pettigrew killed him. If that were the case, then something in this life is driving him forward. He has some reason to believe there’s information to be had at Hogwarts, or at Durmstrang, or with the werewolf community. Perhaps he’s fixated on something new, and in doing so, giving himself the strength to survive where he previously did not.

Percy wishes he shared Crouch's conviction, since from where he's standing, it all feels a bit overwhelming, and more than a little hopeless.

Chapter End Notes

Some of the dialogue in this chapter is taken directly from Goblet of Fire. Mostly the scene after the Morsmordre and the scene where Crouch + co discuss the rules of the Goblet.

DISCORD (2/3)

Chapter Notes

God, sorry this took forever. "Posting weekly," I said so optimistically at the beginning of this. I promise the whole thing is written, just some scenes are...more fleshed out than others. It won't be abandoned, so don't worry about that.

Cheers to everyone who left me your thoughts. I enjoy all of your debating on whether Percy would have known about Moody or Crouch in the original timeline, or whether he's just being idiotic in this timeline by not figuring out that something is up. My personal opinion is that Percy could have known, but I don't think he would have known, because even Percy would not have ignored an actual Death Eater murdering his boss and impersonating Moody. And at the end of GoF it seems unlikely that Fudge would have told anyone anything.

Anyway. That's the direction I chose to take it in (for the DRAMA if nothing else), but super interested to hear your thoughts on Percy's decisions in GoF (and in this, of course!)

CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCORD (2/3)

1994 — 1995 (Percy is 18 & 31, Harry is 14, and Severus is 34, and Voldemort is trapped in the form of a child)

November 1994

Percy has spent the last few days thinking about it and concluded that Tom would look best in oils: traditional, decadent, a bit cold.

He's not a particularly *good* oil painter, and so he manages to find an instructor through the incredibly expedient step of owling Narcissa Malfoy. She, predictably, knows everyone, and is even able to write him a letter of introduction.

(He resolutely does not think of how appalled his parents would be to know he voluntarily contacted the Malfoys for help. Art lessons are hardly *evil*, even if the subject himself may be).

Surprisingly, he can even afford the lessons without dipping into his excess supply created by the Philosopher's Stone. He'd accuse the Malfoys of charity, except the only thing more unlikely than a Malfoy helping a Weasley is a Malfoy giving a Weasley money. Percy’s

Ministry salary is as unused as it was the first time; at least one thing constant in both timelines is his utter inability to have a social life.

November is otherwise lonely. Tonks is constantly busy, investigating the riots and trying to weasel the truth out of Mad-Eye Moody. Percy is not entirely convinced there *is* any truth to uncover. He'd looked up the report that Diggory had co-filed with Arthur, which seems to suggest that the only culprit in the whole affair is Moody himself, who had illegally cursed his dustbins to attack any intruders. *Likely a stray cat*, Diggory had scrawled at the end, and Arthur had written just under, *dustbins removed; A.M. fined.* Percy sends a copy of the report to Tonks, who steadfastly refuses to acknowledge that she is chasing after a Kneazle.

Percy feels embarrassed about Liam seeing him eat lunch alone and so ends up often spending his lunch hour in the Library of Archives, trying to pinpoint where the orphanage that Tom lived may be. The Library has huge shelves of every conceivable book and large boxes filled with miniaturised objects collected from centuries of society; Percy spends an entire afternoon distracted from his job, looking through a collection of old scrolls that past apprentices had submitted at the conclusion of their apprenticeship in a bid for master. How interesting it must have been to study magic back then, when so much of magical theory was left to be discovered. There is an entire work merely on the properties of the Levitation Charm, which Percy makes a copy of for his own perusal. Imagine, the air *hardening!*

However much time he spends choosing random boxes to peek into, he spends more time pouring through maps of Muggle Britain, looking again through old *Daily Prophets* to glean any trace of Tom's movements, and worrying over single-serving salads about his next move. In the back of his mind, he knows that he has to begin making a choice, and soon. This time in the last timeline he was beginning to feel contrary to his parents, embarrassed with how easily everyone dismissed him. He'd started working ridiculously inflated hours, staying late into the night, as if completing a report by morning would win him the respect he so craved.

Now, he's on rather better terms with his family, though his parents are not entirely cheerful about the *Prewett decision,* as his mother calls it icily. Charlie, at least, is something approaching a friend, and Percy's been considerably more kind to Ron and Harry than he'd been originally. Mr. Crouch knows his name, which does negate some of the need to overachieve.

If the timeline continued exactly the same way, Percy would preside over the trial attempting to expel Harry. He'd spend the next year working for Fudge and Umbridge, hearing their rhetoric and believing it. He'd become Junior Assistant to the Minister, even when the Minister was Pius, Imperiused for evil. He would repent too late to be of any use of all.

His proximity to the seat of figurehead power did give Percy a sickening inside look into the Dark Lord's machinations, at the cost of his relationship with his family.

Should he do it again?

***

Before his first painting lesson, Narcissa invites him over for tea.

“I thought you might use this parlour,” she says after the house elf formally received Percy at the entrance, bowed, and led him to the small, airy room. “We hardly use it; your work shan’t be disturbed. Mr. Barrington quite likes Malfoy Manor, too.”

Percy had assumed there was some sort of classroom, or maybe he would go to the teacher’s home. He hadn’t known he had to provide a location. That throws a slight dent in his plans: he can hardly leave a canvas with Tom Riddle’s face in Lucius Malfoy’s home.

Whose face can he leave? An old classmate? A professor? No, that would be exceedingly odd. A self-portrait? Perhaps, but that leaves him feeling a bit—vulnerable.

“Mr. Weasley? Is my offer not to your liking?”

Percy starts. “No, no, my apologies, Lady Malfoy,” he says awkwardly. He’s balanced on a very uncomfortable chair, and he worries that he’ll look even more out of place trying to fix his position than maintaining it, frozen and rattled. His palms, despite himself, are clammy. “I was just—thinking about what I was planning on painting.”

Narcissa’s eyes are grey, like Draco, like Sirius. They’re warm, though, and when she smiles they crinkle with genuine lines. “Worried you may face judgement? I'm not an excellent artist myself, so I promise I shan't judge your efforts."

Percy looks up but she’s smiling, as if they’re in on a joke together. “A bit,” he admits. “Given my available options as subjects, I imagine I’ll inevitably commit some sort of faux pas when I leave a redhead in your parlour. Doesn't really match the decor, I would imagine.”

Narcissa laughs, the sound lovely and light. “You’re rather refreshing,” she says. “I see why Draco likes you.”

Percy had not known Draco liked him enough to tell his mother about it. He looks down, feeling a bit warm.

“Go on,” she urges. “Tell me the great mystery.”

Percy’s mind is completely blank. He looks around him, absently noting the flowered pattern on the silk chaise, and then, for some inexplicable reason, says, “My father.”

Of *everyone* to pick…! Percy clenches his toes in his shoes in irritation.

“Oh, how splendid,” says Narcissa, her warm, interested expression not flinching. “A birthday gift, perhaps? Lucius is turning forty-one this year, you know. And Arthur?”

Percy has to quickly do a mental tally. “Forty-five,” he says. His father is older than Lucius? He’d always assume they were in the same year.

“And neither look a day over forty-two,” Narcissa teases.

Sitting here in Narcissa Malfoy's elegantly decorated east parlour—for she later informs him that they have several such rooms, each outfitted for a slightly different purpose—is so peaceful and easy. No wonder Draco is so *calm* all the time. That calmness was baked into his spine since birth. Percy finds himself relaxing, able to shift into a more comfortable position without making any embarrassing noises.

"Thank you again for organising the lessons."

She waves her hand as if to dismiss his worries. "We've really been quite impressed with you. I know Lucius and Arthur don't get along very well—to say nothing of Draco and Ronald—but I *do* hope you and I can get past that. If I were to limit my social calendar to people *not* related to those my husband or my son are feuding with, I'd hardly fill a single weekend."

Percy chuckles. How is this beautiful, poised, friendly woman the fearsome Narcissa Black, married to the Dark Lord's right hand man? How had it been for them during the First War? Maybe then Lucius had still been young; maybe he and Narcissa escaped notice.

In just under two year's time, the Dark Lord may be sitting in this very parlour.

Percy looks at Narcissa and he wants to warn her, but of course he can't; that would be tremendously foolish, not to mention incredibly premature. But it seems so unfair that in addition to everything else the Dark Lord takes, he takes the beautiful too.

"Something is on your mind, Mr. Weasley."

"Percy, please," he says automatically. He opens his mouth and once again something comes out that he didn't plan. "I somehow was thinking of Mr. Crouch. Have you seen him recently? He looks very ill."

Narcissa doesn't bat an eye at the non-sequitur. She hums in consideration, lifting her mug to her mouth. "I will ask Lucius, for I haven't seen Crouch in many years. Ever since his wife and son passed, he's undoubtedly neglected his health. Perhaps his bad habits are simply...catching up to him."

Percy nods. He doesn't know what it is about the perfect serenity of this room, or the calming presence of Narcissa Malfoy, but he feels as though he has no control over what comes out of his bloody mouth. He takes a firm sip of tea to forestall any other ridiculous comments.

"I hear you've risen to the occasion admirably," continues Narcissa. "Draco tells me you've been managing the Tournament rather single-handedly. Not a single death so far, not to mention a fight between schools."

Percy gratefully seizes on the new topic. "Oh, yes, it's been quite the responsibility," he says, nodding. "Between the logistics, of course, and the rest of my workload, I feel rather despairing that International Cooperation can ever be achieved. But yes, no deaths so far."

"I *must* ask, we've all been wondering," Narcissa says, leaning forward. "However *did* Harry Potter get his name in the Goblet?"

“It’s a bit of a mystery, actually,” reveals Percy. Narcissa’s eyes widen and he continues, gratified, “I’m taking over the investigation on that. I think it could maybe even be Dumbledore, setting up a test for Potter.”

“Oh, yes, that’s precisely the type of thing Albus would do.”

“Or a Dark Wizard,” he says before he remembers where he is.

Narcissa doesn’t seem to take offence. “It seems a bit convoluted, no? And Moody is there; he’s one of the most feared Aurors. Did you know that he demonstrated the Unforgivables in class? Draco was distraught for days.”

Percy privately doubts this. But Moody, demonstrating Unforgivables? And Dumbledore allowed it? What possible educational value could that hold for fourteen year old students? Merlin, did he show the first years, too? What did he demonstrate on—rats, spiders?

Although if the famous Auror Alastor Moody can cast the Unforgivables as coolly as he pleases, perhaps it isn’t so taboo for Percy to consider practising the same. His one Imperius curse had not left him feeling any worse for wear.

Narcissa shakes her head. “He’s been acting erratically for the past few years. It’s sad, isn’t it; so many of those in power are getting old, out of touch. We need the new generation—people like you, Percy—to take up the torch and continue to lead us forward.”

“My friend Nymphadora—” Percy says, and then abruptly shuts his mouth. Merlin. He should not be thinking of Narcissa as a friend. She is married to Lucius Malfoy; she may not be an enemy (yet), but she is not harmless either.

This time, Narcissa reacts. Her grip tightens on her teacup and she shifts, just slightly, so that she’s closer to Percy. “My niece.”

“She’s Moody’s understudy, I believe,” Percy says awkwardly.

“You two are friends?”

“Yes,” Percy says. He grips his own teacup tighter. “I went to her mother. I hoped she may help me learn about my...heritage.”

Narcissa says nothing.

“As Weasleys, we have very little,” he continues. He’s not even flushing red; they both know this is true. “But I do have a heritage, through my father and my mother, and Madam Tonks helped me learn it.”

“Andy does know all the gossip,” Narcissa says, very quietly. Percy looks at her sideways and sees her visibly pull her mask over her face. “Percy—what is she like, Nymphadora?”

“She’s brilliant,” Percy says, hoping desperately that Narcissa isn’t searching for negative news. “She’s very smart and very confident. She’s quite skilled at magic, particularly Potions

and Transfiguration. She has a strong sense of humour, though it sometimes can be shocking, and she works incredibly hard but is always cheerful about it."

Percy stops. Had that been inappropriate?

"She sounds like Andromeda," Narcissa says, and it almost sounds wistful. Abruptly she sits straighter and her face smooths of emotion. "Well, Percy, it was very nice to have you over. Please feel free to schedule your sessions with Mr. Barrington at your own convenience."

Percy stands, understanding very clearly that he'd overstepped some line. "I apologise, if I spoke of things better left unspoken."

Narcissa meets his eyes and she is once again warm and lovely and alive. "Not unspoken," she says. "But they are admittedly surprising."

Percy smiles bashfully. "Thank you again for letting me use your parlour."

She smiles mischievously, and Percy can suddenly see Draco in the curve of her smile. "My only request is that you show me your progress periodically. I shan't show Lucius; his tolerance may not extend to a portrait of Arthur in his home, but I've never held a grudge against your father."

She reads the question that is clearly on Percy's face and shakes her head chidingly.

"That is not a story for me to tell. It is not a story I believe you want to hear, either."

This, of course, piques Percy's curiosity and he resolves to ask his father the next time that he's home.

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Giants, interestingly, organise themselves in groups of approximately twenty. One head giant, considered to be somewhat of a king, and then roughly ten adults and five to ten children. The title of king, or their giantish equivalent, is granted to the giant able to kill the reigning leader and avoid being killed by the rest of the clan.

Somehow—and here Percy is glad little is known about giant physiology—giants can mate with humans and produce offspring. Hagrid; Madam Maxime. While giants are said to be brutish, unintelligent, and violent, their half-human children can incorporate themselves into society.

Giants respect displays of power, strength, and valuable gifts. On all fronts, Percy has to reluctantly conclude the Dark side, so to speak, has an advantage, but the Ministry could win loyalty if they act quickly. Giants have no real desire to integrate into normal Wizarding society; their greatest desire is to be left alone, plyed with fancy goods, to their own savage devices.

Werewolves, meanwhile, have a much more complex social structure. They operate according to pack law, a dizzying array of social norms and relationships that even Romulus Rosencrantz, the werewolf scholar—famously allowing himself to be bitten—cannot easily distil. The leader of the pack is important. Werewolves like Lupin, packless, are weak but more human.

Werewolves also have more complex motivations. They are largely human, after all. They are driven by pride and greed and anger, like any other human, as well as comfort and respect and gifts. The Ministry has a fighting chance, Percy writes at the end of the memo, underlying the next words, by providing access to supplies, shelter, and Wolfsbane.

He notices Amos Diggory watching him carefully when Percy comes in during the lunch hour to browse some of the reports compiled by his department. Diggory liaisons more often with the goblins than werewolves or giants, but perhaps he is interested in what Percy is doing for his connection to the Weasley family. Percy leaves quickly after duplicating some of the reports with a tap of his wand; he does not want Diggory to tell Arthur anything that Percy cannot explain.

He submits the memo to Crouch, feeling a bit proud of his analysis. If Crouch truly is focusing on besting the Dark Lord, maybe he'll take Percy's recommendations into consideration—as he should—and Percy can finally start enacting real change. It's a bit exciting, to be honest. Despite everything, Percy cannot really find it within him to believe the Ministry is inherently as ineffective of a place as his brothers do. There are good people working here, good people working to keep the wheels of society turning, good people following orders, and it is not the fault of the organisation when those orders turn toward harm.

Percy has taken to Apparating directly from his living room into the Ministry lobby as to avoid the chill. Crouch begins to work the kinds of hours that Percy remembered from the previous timeline, disappearing into his office and only emerging to shout hoarsely at Percy or Liam to fetch him meals and tea. Whatever he's doing involves a tremendous amount of writing; Percy knocks with a tray one day in mid-November and sees Crouch with a veritable mountain of crumpled parchment on his desk, covered in his thin, dark handwriting.

"What do you think of Dumbledore?" Crouch says abruptly, sweeping a great pile of scratching to the ground.

"Sir?" Percy asks cautiously. It feels like everything he does around Crouch is cautious. He does not remember Crouch being so brittle last time, though Percy admittedly had been equally cautious, more out of nerves than anything else.

"Do you think he's a strong leader? Capable?"

"He's certainly capable," Percy equivocates. He has gotten the impression Crouch doesn't particularly like Dumbledore, but it is not exactly *political* to openly disparage the great Albus Dumbledore.

Crouch waves his quill irritably. "But if something were to happen; if there was an emergency; would you *trust* him?"

No, thinks Percy. He hears an echo of Tom's cry of rage, remembers the way his face had twisted with Tom's disgust as they faced the shadow of Dumbledore produced by the diadem.

"I suppose," says Percy. "May I ask why you ask, sir?"

Crouch gives him a look. Percy takes that as a no and backs out hastily.

Maybe Crouch is trying for Dumbledore's job, or at least part of the small but occasionally vocal minority—led by one Lucius Malfoy—to have him ousted. This reminds Percy of Lucius' invitation, but he hasn't quite worked up the courage to meet him in his own stomping grounds.

Tonks doesn't think so; she thinks that Crouch knows something about the darkness that's begun to spring up around the country, small groups of teenagers causing havoc, pairs of men in cloaks sowing dissent. She only knows because she managed to get herself assigned to Scrimgeour in the absence of Moody, and Scrimgeour is convinced that some kind of trouble is brewing.

("Moody confirmed his identity," Tonks says sadly, passing him in the hallway. "I tested him with nearly ten different passwords, and he got them all.")

Tonks has also found some information about Bertha Jorkins. No family in Albania. No family at all, really. She'd announced one day her intentions to visit Albania without naming any specifics like what city she was visiting or how long she would be gone.

("You should ask Charlie."

"Charlie?"

"Romania, Albania. What's the difference? I'm sure he'd be up for a bit of sleuthing.")

Percy even lunches with Landon one day, though his friend's days off are extremely limited, owing to the rigorous schedule of being an Unspeakable. Landon has a harried, anxious look, his face a bit grey, and he spends the entire lunch period glancing at his watch. The Unspeakable track is notoriously difficult, he informs Percy, and he will *not* wash out before the end of the training period.

Finally, he can't avoid going to Gringotts (and, correspondingly, seeing Bill) much longer. He needs more money, and he does want to discreetly inquire whether one Tom M. Riddle had a Gringotts vault.

The first goal he succeeds at after a very lengthy and exhausting argument with his chief account manager, who tries to convince Percy that the fee they're charging to convert gold to Galleons is perfectly reasonable. While in theory Percy has unlimited money—in theory, since he does not have the resources to recreate the Elixir of Gold without access to a Potions lab, and he's not quite ready to tell Snape about his theft all those years ago—the miserly part of him refuses on principle to accept an inflated charge.

The second goal he fails at completely. His account manager, somewhat jovial after their protracted and nasty fight wherein Percy gained an improvement of only a few Sickles, closes down instantly.

“We do not share our customer’s secrets,” is all Percy can get out of him.

And so Percy is already in a black mood when he goes to the employee break room to see Bill. Bill looks wonderful, of course: strong, tall, and still improbably tanned in November. He insists on making Percy a cup of tea and feeding him a biscuit, like he’s some sort of male Molly Weasley, and even gives Percy a very strong hug.

“Good to see you too,” Percy says, massaging his lower back. Merlin, he really needs to exercise.

“So great to be back in England,” Bill says enthusiastically. “The snow! I’ve not seen snow for years, Perce.”

“It’s not even snowing yet,” Percy can’t help but point out.

Bill refuses to be cowed. “But there’s the *suggestion* of snow. In Cairo we didn’t even have that! Only the omnipresent reality of sand.”

Bill clearly intends this to be funny. Percy only has it in him to smile weakly.

“So, Perce, what’re you here for? Opened your own Gringotts vault? And right after graduation, too. I’ve been keeping my meagre earnings in a dragonskin bag.”

“Yes, I opened a vault as soon as I turned seventeen, actually,” Percy says. “I was just withdrawing some money from it.”

“And how are your expenses? Manageable? You never did tell me where you decided to live at the end of the day. Not the Burrow, I hear; Mum was rather tossed off."

“Quite manageable, thank you,” Percy says stiffly. He doesn’t have any friends, after all; he saves loads by going directly home after work and cooking various combinations of vegetables and chicken. “I’ve a small flat in London. Barely a flat, really. More like a closet with a bed.”

Percy doesn’t actually know where Bill is living. He has hoards of friends all over the country; he could probably hop from couch to couch for a year and not run out of people willing to put him up at their own expense. He doesn't want to join the list.

“Good for you,” Bill says approvingly.

There’s a bit of an awkward silence.

“And you’re going to Hogwarts, I hear? Checking in on the Tournament? It’s a lot of responsibility, I’d imagine.”

There once was a time where Percy and Bill didn't talk to each other like an awkward uncle and a more awkward nephew, but Percy can barely remember it.

"Not too much," he says noncommittally. He keeps hesitating, unsure whether he can ask Bill the question that's on his mind.

He can't ask Bill, though. What's Bill going to do: open the vault for him? Percy is reasonably sure Tom opened a vault at Gringotts, but that knowledge hardly helps him.

He needs to focus on goals that are *attainable*. Goals like finding the ancestral Gaunt home, or tracking down a Muggle orphanage. Gringotts is like a prison; he's never going to get inside, not even with Bill's help.

***

And so he requests to meet with Tobias Greengrass.

Tobias agrees, amused, and for the third time in Percy's life, he finds himself at *A Single Blade* for tea with a pureblood prince. This time he only orders tea, Earl Grey, one slice of lemon.

Tobias orders a whiskey, neat, even though it is just past ten in the morning on a Saturday.

Percy looks down at his tea when it arrives. There's *got* to be some sort of rule book about this.

"There's no big secret," Tobias says with unerring accuracy into the particulars of Percy's private thoughts. "Well, maybe one. Whatever you order, do so with supreme confidence, as if the other person's choice is simply unthinkable. Observe." He winks at Percy and then his face changes, smoothing out. He eyes Percy's tea, making it somehow excruciatingly obvious in the set of his eyebrows and the lift in his chin that ordering *tea* was plebeian and ordering *Earl Grey* was nothing short than obscene. The sliver of lemon, added in an attempt to be cultured, merely makes the entire thing more pathetic, or so says the slight flaring of his nostrils.

Percy is deeply impressed, and more than a bit envious, and a bit ticked off.

Tobias grins easily and the expression slides off his face like water. "You've got to work on keeping your thoughts to yourself," he advises, taking a sip of his drink. "Your face is far too expressive by half."

Percy nods. *Mirror practice*, he schedules for later in the day.

"Now, tell me about what you're up to these days. I never hear anything from Landon; he's disappeared into the belly of the beast and he shan't return for anything less than an Order of Merlin."

Percy laughs, surprised at the easy intimacy that Tobias creates, simply on the back of their shared acquaintance and the one week Percy spent in his house. “Well, I’ve also disappeared into a belly of a beast, though one less ferocious than the Unspeakable department,” he says, and if he feels himself trying to be clever, he doesn’t stop himself. “I’m assisting Mr. Crouch, head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation.”

Tobias raises an eyebrow and raises his glass slightly in salute. “Well played. I assume you knew of the Tournament before making your choice?”

Percy is about to say no, of course not, but then he tries to look secretive and just a big smug. “I can neither confirm nor deny.” He continues, “It is fairly interesting due to the Tournament. Crouch tasks me to visit Hogwarts periodically, keep an eye on things. We’re betting on some sort of international incident, though likely of the teenaged sort.”

Tobias chuckles appreciatively. “I’m surprised none yet have happened.”

“That we know of,” says Percy mock-darkly. It’s surprisingly easy to talk to Tobias like this, as if they are two equals, sitting opposite tea and whiskey in a cultured and expensive café.

“And, if I may get to the point, may I ask why you wanted to meet?” Tobias continues to smile to take the bite out of his words. “I’m always pleased to mentor a promising young man like yourself, but if I may posit my impression of you, I believe you are unlikely to contact me without a specific reason.”

Percy flushes slightly, mostly heat around his neck that he hopes doesn’t creep onto his face. “Well, I do not know if you recall, but Landon and I were researching the Founder’s Artefacts.”

“How could I forget? Landon was quite saddened that you never found even a whisper of a diadem or a locket or whatever else you two were convinced you’d find in Hogwarts.”

“We gave up on any artefacts themselves years ago,” Percy says, not inaccurately. “But I kept researching the Founders themselves. I find history very interesting, you see.”

“Quite.”

Percy hesitates and then plunges forward. “I found that the Hufflepuff line allegedly ended with Heidi Hufflepuff’s marriage into the Smith family; the Slytherins, meanwhile, have no other descendants than the Gaunt family.”

“You are quite the researcher, Percy,” Tobias says. Something in his eyes have sharpened; Percy can tell that whatever he just said has interested Tobias. The other man leans forward slightly. “Not many have found those connections.”

“I met with Horatio Smith,” he continues, not sure precisely how to respond to that. “He didn’t have much to tell me. But I don’t believe any Gaunts are left.”

“I don’t believe so either.” Something about the carefully studied way that he says this makes Percy suddenly certain that Tobias Greengrass knows precisely who Tom Riddle is.

He decides to finish what he started. “Well, I was hoping to find the Gaunt’s ancestral home. If it’s not protected by wards, I thought I might...investigate.”

Tobias evaluates Percy for several long, silent seconds. Then he says, “Percy, I say this to you as someone with a vested interest in seeing what you may accomplish one day. I do not believe you should pursue this line of inquiry any further.”

“Sir?”

“I think you know some of what I know,” Tobias says very quietly. “And if you do know what I know, then you will stay away from the Gaunts, and any of their descendants that may be...still alive.”

“And if they are still alive?” Percy dares.

Tobias breathes, his eyes intent, “Then I would keep my head down and hope they do not notice me.”

“Have they noticed you, sir?”

Tobias’ eyes darken, and he no longer looks like the friendly father of one of Percy’s school friends. “They tried, once, and I hope to Merlin they do not again.”

Well, that answers precisely as many questions as it raises.

Tobias finishes the rest of his whiskey and stands. “Do not do anything stupid or hasty,” he counsels. “I will look into what we spoke of, and keep in mind what we both think to be true.”

Percy watches him leave with quick, sure steps, not entirely what he just agreed to, nor what he just told Tobias.

***

Hi Percy (and Tonks):

D and I went to Albania last weekend. Tonks, it’s not the same country, not at all. Nice for a visit, though.

I asked around discreetly in Tirana, but it’s harder than I thought to track down an errant witch. I tried asking at some inns but they all looked at me strangely. There are some whispers here, though, of a vampire in the forest. One bartender told me that the vampire is thought to have been defeated in August, just about when Bertha disappeared, but besides that I’m not sure if there’s any connection. Don’t think my talents really lie in espionage, to be honest.

Also, keep it quiet, you two, but I'll be back just in time for the First Task at Hogwarts. Shall we all go for a pint?

Charlie

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The problem that Percy is facing in his research is that *theoretically* the difference between one's soul and one's magic makes sense. Similarly, it seems obvious that people have minds even if they do not have magic. Muggles are capable of thought.

But to separate them in any meaningful way—at least, in a legal way—seems impossible. Thus even if Percy were to create a spell to track souls or minds, rather than magic or blood, there would be no way for him to test it on anything other than the Horcrux.

Point me Tom Riddle points to the diadem. *Point me Lady Ravenclaw* does not, though Percy is not familiar with Ravenclaw's magical signature, and so he had not really expected the spell to work. At least that implies to him that Tom's magical signature does not change, even within his different Horcruxes. That seems like a breakthrough, but he struggles to verbalise what it might actually mean for their question. At this point he is considering whether he or Snape should just make a bloody Horcrux so at least they could study how it works.

He spends every bit of free time that he has working on the portrait. Tom would know. Whether Tom would tell him is another question, but he would rather wrangle with Tom than make a Horcrux himself.

(Although it would be useful to have a Horcrux, wouldn't it? At the very least, he would not have to worry he would die).

***

November 24 dawns bright and blustery. Percy makes it to Hogwarts just past nine. Charlie arrived over the weekend, but Percy has been swamped with the seemingly interminable forms required to authorise the shipment of four dragons from Romania to Scotland and back. He'd forgotten how much *paperwork* he and Liam had to do for this damned Tournament.

When Percy goes to visit Snape, he finds the man in a black mood.

"Sir?" Percy hesitantly says when it becomes clear that Snape wants to mutter angrily to himself instead of acknowledging his presence.

“Have you anything to report?” Snape snarls, turning on Percy.

“No, sir.”

“Then leave my sight *this instance*.”

Percy flees.

He goes to visit his family instead. Harry is sitting with Hermione, staring at a piece of toast. Harry looks so nervous that he may faint where he stands. Poor boy; even at eighteen, he’s short for his age. At fourteen, Harry looks particularly small.

“You’ll be completely fine,” Percy says with the assurance of the future. He hadn’t been there but he’d later heard of the superior flying Harry exhibited that day. “Play to your strengths.”

“Moody said that,” Harry says absently. Hermione clears her throat and Harry takes an unwilling bite from the toast he’s holding limply in his hand.

“Where’s Ron?”

Harry’s expression abruptly turns black. “He’s upset at me,” he mumbles.

Percy rolls his eyes. “He’s just jealous,” he tells Harry, this time secure in his understanding of Ronald Weasley. “He’ll get over it once he realises how assuredly *unlucky* you would be to be chosen for this Tournament.”

Harry looks up. “You think I’m unlucky for this?”

“Yes,” Percy says cautiously. “Don’t you?”

“*Merlin,* yes.”

Harry takes another bite of his toast, this time unprompted. “If I—don’t have it under control,” he says, looking up with something like desperation. “Are they going to let me die?”

Hermione inhales sharply but Percy doesn’t have to think too hard about this. “Dumbledore absolutely will not let you die,” Percy says, meeting Harry’s eyes. *Harry* at least would be assured of his safety in the Tournament, though Percy cannot say the same for the other contestants. As usual, when he thinks about Cedric, his stomach lurches and he forces his mind away from the thought. He tries for a joke to distract both him and Harry. “And neither will I, you’ll get me fired.”

“Percy...do you know what the first task is?” Harry asks, ignoring the joke.

Percy hesitates and then nods. “Yes, and I know that Charlie’s here,” he says, lowering his voice. “Trust me; they know how to do their job. You may get a bit singed, but they know how to subdue the—well, they know how to prevent people from dying at this sort of thing. Even fourteen year old boys.”

Harry nods, not looking any more convinced. Percy lingers awkwardly for a few seconds and then goes to seek out Ron. The Fat Lady lets him inside the Common Room when he flashes his Ministry badge after only a bit of teasing about how tall he's grown since he graduated.

Ron is alone in the fourth year's boys dorm. Percy knocks on the door frame and then invites himself in.

"Why are you always *here*," Ron groans when he looks up to see Percy. "I just ditched Fred and George. They seemed to think I should go and *wish Harry luck."*

"Well, you probably should go and wish Harry luck," Percy says delicately.

Ron glowers. "He doesn't need me," he says grumpily. "He has *Hermione*, and the whole bleeding House, and a thousand Galleons."

Percy leans against the door. Ron, in the grand tradition of siblings everywhere, has reverted to a childhood whine when faced with his older brother.

"Ron, do you know how many friends I had in Hogwarts?"

Ron's expression seems to suggest that he has no interest in answering this question.

"One," Percy says firmly. "And we never talk now because he's so busy with work. Don't throw away your best friends because you're jealous."

"I'm not *jealous*."

"Being Harry is not—a blessing," says Percy. "He needs you, Ron. Someone is likely trying to kill him with this scheme."

Ron sighs. Percy knows Ron knows what he's saying is true, but he also knows he isn't going to admit it now.

With nothing else to do, he visits Myrtle. His trips to Hogwarts are much less productive than he'd once thought.

She's spinning around in her bathroom, excited for the first task.

"*Dragons,* Percy! I'm going to go. I never watch those nasty Quidditch games but I can't miss *dragons*. Do you think any of the Champions will die? Should I introduce myself? I hope it's not that *French* girl, she seems rather uppity, but *Cedric* could share my bathroom any day. And Harry, of course."

"None of them will die, Myrtle," he says tiredly, before he freezes. Well, one of them will die. "I hate this bloody year."

"You should have stayed here," Myrtle says tartly. "You could have kept your lessons going."

"I don't have any time at the Ministry, and when I do have time, I don't even know what I should be studying," Percy complains. "More research on souls? What's the bloody use."

"Potions?" Myrtle suggests, making a slow loop.

"I can't brew Potions in my flat."

"You could paint. I still get compliments on the portrait you did of me." Myrtle turns so she's facing him. "Percy, do you think if you dug up my grave, you could make me a *real* portrait?"

Percy splutters. "I'm sorry?"

"Don't you just need a *sample* of me? I can tell you where I'm buried. Then I'd have someone to talk to."

It's an interesting question: can one be a ghost and a portrait? Which would be the more representative self?

"The recipe I saw wasn't clear," Percy says, happy to be distracted from his own misery. "When I first read it, I thought all you needed was blood or bone, but I'm not so sure now. I think you'd need something from the person while they were alive."

Myrtle considers this. "What if you used me? I'm a ghost; I'm alive, sort of. I could dive into the potion."

"I'm pretty sure that would kill you, Myrtle. Again."

She shrugs. "Seems like a win-win. I'd be free, but part of me would be left behind."

Percy thinks about it. "Well, I suppose why couldn't you do the potion with a ghost? We've established the portraits don't have souls, not really. But I'm not sure you would have the same resonant properties as blood."

"My portrait might not remember everything that I do, you mean."

Percy nods absently. It's a thorny puzzle; the kind of thing he may bring up with McGonagall the next time he meets with her. “Then even if you do pass on, there’ll always be a version of you by this bathroom, waiting to talk to someone too sad to face the rest of the castle.”

“I’d like that,” Myrtle says dreamily. “A legacy.”

“We’re going to leave a legacy anyway, Myrtle,” Percy says. “If all goes according to plan.”

Myrtle turns in the air to face him again, her eyes narrowed from behind her round-rimmed glasses. “You can’t give up hope, Percy.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I know you,” she says, and Percy has to look away from the blunt force of her ghostly eyes. “If you stop believing in yourself, you’ll stop trying. It’s like the Patronus.”

Percy’s face sours. It is true that he hasn’t tried to summon a Patronus in many months. But— “I haven’t given up on the Patronus, Myrtle. I’ve been *busy.* Do you know how many things

I've on my plate?"

"You managed to get first in your year at Hogwarts, find two Horcruxes, and destroy one," Myrtle points out coolly. "I don't believe your job is busier than *that.* Something is making you lose hope, Percy. What is it?"

Percy exhales through his nose and adjusts his glasses with one hand. "Nothing's making me *lose* hope, Myrtle. We've barely had any hope at all this whole time."

"Is it because of Tom?"

"No, it's not because of Tom," snaps Percy, spurred into irritation by yet another accusation that he is *missing* Tom, the precursor to the most feared wizard of their time. "Look around you, Myrtle! Everything is proceeding exactly on schedule. It's as if nothing's changed. What has even been the *point* of it all if a seventeen year old is still going to die at the end of the year, and nobody will believe Harry when the Dark Lord returns, and my family will still hate me, and we have no bloody idea where to find the next Horcrux?"

Myrtle watches him silently as he stops, his chest heaving despite himself, and a burn in the back of his throat that matches the flush around his neck and shoulders. He hadn't quite realised until he said it aloud how useless he's been feeling, how pointless it all feels if everything is just going to happen exactly the same way.

"At the risk of pointing out the obvious," says Myrtle into the quiet creaking of the bathroom, "You *want* it to remain the same. At least for now."

"I suppose I want the important parts to stay the same, but everything else to change," Percy mumbles to his feet, both to admit it to himself and to Myrtle.

Myrtle perches on the edge of one of the sinks, the pipes groaning as if she had settled real weight upon the basin. "Snape's been researching the potion, you know. I think he's trying to see if Cedric can be saved."

"I doubt that," Percy says, tiredly. "Snape will be the first to say that Cedric's death is a *regrettable sacrifice.*"

"Well, that's why he's researching it, I'd imagine," Myrtle points out pertly. "To see if Cedric needs to be sacrificed or not. Better than assuming the worst, no?"

Percy tries not to let on how surprised he is by this news. "What are you trying to say, then?"

"I'm saying that you either assume nothing can change, or everything could change," says Myrtle. "But you're avoiding doing the necessary research because you're scared to know the answer."

"I'm not—"

"Aren't you?"

For a second, Percy waits for irritation to lick up his sides. When he realises it's not coming, he chuckles despite himself, shaking his head. "You're a very annoying friend," he informs Myrtle, raising his head to meet her impish grin with a weak smile of his own.

"I'm wise beyond my years," she says loftily, twirling one of her pigtails around her index finger. "And you're not the first wizard to complain to me while missing the obvious."

"Maybe I won't banish you," Percy says, feeling inexplicably lightened. "I'm not sure Hogwarts will be able to get on without your insight."

Myrtle lowers her finger, and her pigtail drops slowly to brush against her shoulder. "I've thought about it," she admits quietly. "I don't really know what I want, Percy."

"Well, you can't go anywhere until we're done with this, one way or another," he says, hitching his bag higher on his shoulder. "Thanks, Myrtle. I'm going to speak to Snape after the Task. He snapped at me when I came by earlier."

"He's having a difficult year, I think," Myrtle says, hopping off the sink to float next to him as they exit the bathroom. "He really hates Mad-Eye Moody. I can sort of understand it, to be honest. I've been sitting in on Moody's classes, and he *really* hates Dark wizards. I think he had some sort of tragic backstory, though none of the ghosts know what it is. He spends most of the time glaring at Snape, who spends most of *his* time glaring at him back."

None of the students had known very much about Snape's Dark background, or at least Percy had certainly never heard anything other than rumours when he had been a student. But he supposes that the adult wizards would have been very much aware of Snape's connections to the Dark Lord. Some of them may have been at Snape's trial, or shocked when Dumbledore personally vouched for Snape. Percy had never really considered what it would be like to be Snape, but perhaps that was the reason why Snape consented to work at Hogwarts, year after year. Percy can't imagine it is very pleasant for Snape to interact with the general public, or anyone in the Ministry.

Percy remembers what it felt like in those days after the war, how so many of his colleagues had been treated like pariahs, and he had been treated like a criminal. There was the Light side and the Dark side, and if the court of society judged that someone was not part of the Light side, they were automatically relegated to the Dark side. Percy had been hissed at in the streets and denied service at Gladrags, all for the crime of believing that what the Minister of Magic said was true, or being too afraid to defy the Ministry.

As if the average wizard hadn't done the same. As if the average wizard hadn't complied with the Death Eaters every day, afraid of attracting attention and being labelled a sympathiser. At the time, Percy had been so wracked with guilt that he'd felt his ostracism justified and had even contributed to it by spending the majority of the time alone in his flat. He would have lost his job if Kingsley hadn't personally argued in his favour.

Percy imagines facing that type of derision for twenty years and shudders. No wonder Snape is in such a foul temper all of the time. Percy can't really blame him.

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Harry looks so small, down there, facing off the dragon with nary but his wand. He manages to complete an impressive Accio, however—Hermione sighs in relief in the aisle in front of Percy—and then transforms the moment he's on his broom. In the air, he is equally small but much more assured and confident, dodging dragon fire as if it were merely a bludger.

"Blimey," Ron says, his face pale, when Harry has to execute a particularly nasty manoeuvre to dodge a burst of flame. Ginny is watching through her fingers, and Percy has to resist the urge to do the same. He sees Charlie shifting by the side of the arena, ready with his wand, but if Harry veers into the wrong burst of flame, nothing that Charlie or any of the other trainers could do would really help. "Someone really is trying to kill him, aren't they?"

"*Honestly,"* Hermione says with an exaggerated sigh. "You are impossible, Ronald."

Ron and Hermione rush to the tent after the task ends. Percy stays with the mild hope that he'll be asked to help deliberate the scores, but alas he remains in the stands, alone.

He wonders how Krum feels, seeing a fourteen year boy fly like that. What must it be like to have your entire identity built upon one skill, only to see another match or even surpass your talents?

When he visits Snape after the Task, Percy cannot tell if the other man has been cheered or disappointed by Harry's inspired performance in the arena. Snape allows him entry into his office without snapping at him so harshly, which Percy takes cautiously as a positive sign, but then glowers disapprovingly over his large hooked nose at Percy, which is definitively far more of a negative sign.

Percy soldiers forward, cutting straight to the chase. "Myrtle told me that you may know what potion the Dark Lord is going to use."

Snape's change twists in annoyance, though his nose features prominently in this expression as well. "It would save us all some time if we three merely spoke together, but I fear that would deprive the ghost of her only joy in her afterlife."

"Myrtle will have to be dead—truly banished—before she stops gossiping," Percy agrees. With Myrtle in mind, he says bluntly, rather than equivocating around the topic, "But if you had a hint as to what potion will be used, why would you not tell me?"

Snape looks faintly taken aback by Percy's forthrightness, or perhaps his lack of subtlety. Percy has come to realise that while he is rather good at being mysterious (particularly after the success of a few sessions in front of the mirror), he is not particularly subtle. Rather, he seems to be so uninteresting to the general public that if he merely keeps his mouth shut, nobody thinks to wonder what he may be up to. A benefit of having few friends, he supposes.

"The ghost must have failed to impress upon you that I have merely a guess."

Percy resists the urge to roll his eyes. Has he not been entirely truthful with Snape? (More or less). He does not know why Snape feels the urge to dance around sensitive topics, but he does not enjoy being on the reciprocating side. “Well, what is the guess?”

“Have you any familiarity with the summer solstice rituals?”

Percy blinks at Snape, taken aback from the question. He thinks first of Aunt Muriel, clad in her light green robes, standing before a crashing blue sea, clutching a rabbit. “Er, a bit. The Light rituals, I suppose.”

Snape raises an eyebrow infinitesimally. “I was not aware that the Weasley family observed the Old Ways.”

“My Aunt Muriel does,” Percy explains defensively.

“What do you practise?”

Percy describes the ritual: capturing the rabbit under the light of the sun, presenting it at sunrise, asking for a wish.

“Interesting,” remarks Snape when Percy is finished. “The most common Dark ritual is similar, though with some obvious inversions. Each individual must procure their own animal sacrifice under the full moon, rather than the full sun, and while you may ask for a wish, you do not do so aloud.”

“So are you implying that the Dark Lord uses a ritual to return?”

“I believe he will corrupt a more complex version of a Dark summer solstice ritual,” confirms Snape in a low voice. “You are sure that Pettigrew sacrifices his flesh and that the events occur in a graveyard?”

Percy nods. “As far as I am aware.”

“There is a very old potion that we refer to today merely as the Blood and Bone potion.” Snape hesitates and then turns to the shelves behind him, sliding a recipe out of a book of scrolls and handing it to Percy. Percy scans it and blanches. “Yes. It requires, as you can see, *flesh of a servant; blood of an enemy; bone of a father.* A triad of powerful ingredients, and three types of sacrifices, to lend the potion thrice the power.”

“But this potion does not seem tied to the summer solstice,” says Percy, wrinkling his nose despite himself as he reads the gruesome list of ingredients.

“It does not confer a wish, either,” points out Snape. “But rather is used to bring someone back from the very brink of death if they are ill. I cannot be certain, of course, but I know how the Dark Lord thinks, and I believe it likely he will use this potion in conjunction with a summer solstice ritual to wish himself back to a body.”

Percy purses his lips, still looking at the recipe, written out in Snape’s spiky handwriting that he recognises instantly after fourteen years of deciphering his instructions on the board. “So do they use Cedric as a sacrifice?”

When Snape does not immediately reply, Percy glances up, feeling an instinctive ball of worry form in his stomach. Snape's face is closed off and forbidding, and Percy has to fight the urge to apologise for his question.

"What?"

Snape seems to choose his words carefully. "I do not believe the Dark Lord needs a sacrifice beyond what the potion requires."

Percy's instinctive flutter of relief is tempered by the scowl still marring Snape's features. "So Cedric need not go with Harry."

"We do not know," emphasises Snape. Percy closes his eyes briefly; he knows what Snape is implying.

They do not *know* that the Dark Lord will use the Blood and Bone potion. They do not *know* that Cedric need not be sacrificed. They do not *know* anything. They are nothing more than blind explorers without the use of magic, fumbling around in the dark without so much as a Seeing Eye spell for mercy.

"So we need to let him go along with Harry," says Percy dully, his hand falling to his side. He resists the urge to crumple the parchment up viciously. The brief elation he'd felt after his conversation with Myrtle—and the soaring feeling in his stomach, watching Harry twist his way victoriously out of a line of dragon fire—grumbles and subsides, leaving him with the all-too-familiar resignation.

"We will not interfere with the Tournament," confirms Snape, his voice like shards of slivered glass.

"But how can we even be sure Cedric will be the sacrifice?" Percy snaps back heatedly, feeling sliced raw by the thought. "If anything changes, he won't be with Harry in the maze. Shall we Imperius him ourselves, lead him to his slaughter like a rabbit?"

Snape does not respond to his outburst, instead holding out a hand for the recipe that Percy still grips tightly in one hand. "In truth I have a hard time believing the Dark Lord will rely on an innocent. It is as you say: there is no confirmation that Potter will even win the Tournament, let alone bring with him an extra contestant."

"But we cannot be sure."

"Not at present." A second later, more gently, "Percy. I will continue searching. If I can find a way to communicate with Pettigrew, we may be able to tell with more confidence. I do not enjoy the thought that we may sacrifice an innocent due only to our own ignorance."

"*My* ignorance," says Percy bitterly. "If I had just bothered to think this all through…if I had just *spoken* to Harry, understood more about the potion…"

"You could not discern all of the timeline's mysteries," snaps Snape, and though his tone is harsh, the words are oddly reassuring. Percy looks up to meet the other man's dark,

unfathomable gaze. “Even had you kidnapped Potter and forced him to write an account of everything that had occurred, you would have missed something, and we would at one point or another feel constrained by our lack of knowledge. We will proceed with what we know, and we will strive to learn what we can, is that understood?”

Percy swallows around an uncomfortable edge in his throat and nods mutely.

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“To Harry,” Tonks cheers three hours later, holding up her tankard of regular, non-buttery beer. Percy has a gin fizz; Madam Rosmerta had only given him the slightest bit of teasing over his age when he’d ordered it, but she does that to all Hogwarts graduates, so he doesn’t take it personally.

“To Harry,” echo the Weasley brothers. Bill is there too, but Percy is trying not to let his older —younger, in a way—brother bother him. His stomach is still unsettled from his earlier conversation with Snape, and the alcohol in his drink is not helping him calm down.

“He’s small but he is mighty,” Charlie says, setting down his own tankard. “Did you see that flying! He should go for England.”

Bill nods emphatically. “I think he’s even better than you, Charlie.”

Charlie takes it without hurt pride. That’s one thing Percy has always liked about Charlie: very little ego. “Oliver loved that kid,” he says, grinning. “Wrote to me about him every year. *Harry’s unbelievable!”*

Percy grins too, despite himself. “He did love Harry,” he contributes. “Used to recite his stats in the bathroom.”

“Hopefully Oliver can play professionally one day.” Charlie wipes his mouth and then raises his glass again. “To our Ministry employees, of course.”

“Cheerio,” Tonks says, clinking her glass with his. “You could come too, Charles. Join Percival and I at luncheon.”

Charlie shakes his head, holding up his glass as if to ward off her attack. “I’m still happy with the dragons, thank you.”

There’s a moment where both Tonks and Percy want to ask about Daniel; they catch each other’s eye and quickly turn instead to Bill, who is eyeing them a bit bemusedly and sipping his Firewhiskey, the glass steaming.

“And you, Bill? How’s Gringotts?”

“The goblins are antsy,” Bill says, frowning. “They’ve heard something. Rumours, I think, though they won’t share exactly what. Amos is spending more time at Gringotts than his own house these days.”

Tonks nods, the mood darkening. “Same with the Aurors. Nobody wants to say *Death Eaters*, but we’re afraid someone’s trying to round them up again, start back the old parade.”

Percy sits very quietly, his mouth dry.

“What, like *You Know Who*?” Charlie asks incredulously.

Tonks shakes her head. “Not hardly,” she says. “But there’s always the risk of a copycat. I mean, he disappeared at the peak of his power; half of his cronies are big shots in the Ministry now. I’ve gone over their trials. I bet Crouch has a lot to say on the topic.”

“Crouch?”

“You know, because of his son.”

At Percy’s quizzical look, Tonks elaborates. “His son was one of the people charged with torturing the Longbottoms; life in Azkaban. Crouch sentenced him himself. Said he had no son any more, that justice had to be served.”

Bill lets out a low whistle, taking a gulp of his drink. “Seems like Crouch would be the *last* person to say anything about Death Eaters.”

“True,” Tonks concedes. “But he *hates* Death Eaters. If he sent his own son to die—and he did die, you know, within the year, I think—imagine what he’ll do if there are copycats now.”

Percy had never known this, not in either timeline. He reapplies the Cooling charm on his glass absently while he thinks about it. Maybe that was why Crouch was acting so strangely. Imagine, sentencing one’s own child to Azkaban—and knowing that child helped to torture a young couple to insanity. Seeing signs of the Death Eaters returning would definitely trigger some odd behaviour.

“Well, the news of Death Eaters hasn’t reached Romania yet,” Charlie offers. “Although like I said, in Albania they were speaking of a vampire. Seems like a lot of the creatures are on the move, which I suppose doesn’t bode well for anyone.”

Definitely related to the Dark Lord, in whatever form he’s in. Although, Percy honestly would not put it past him to possess an actual vampire.

Had he missed this all the first time? Noticing the signs, watching as those inside the Ministry began preparing? He’d thought the entire country was oblivious until that day when the Dark Lord attacked the Hall of Prophecy. He’d been so stubborn, so insistent, precisely because he believed what everyone else had believed.

But if he’d just opened his eyes a bit more, he could have seen the truth earlier.

Percy sighs heavily.

"You all right, Perce?"

"Oh, yes. It's just...a lot, sometimes."

Bill nods. His eyes have no business being that warm, or his smile so understanding. "It really is," he agrees softly. Then, a smirk. "Did I tell you lot that goblins are terrible gossips? You should hear what they've told me about Bagman."

"I bet Crouch hates Bagman, too," says Tonks, taking an effusive sip of her beer. "He must be having a rough go of it, Crouch. Crouch tried to lock away Bagman, too; apparently Bagman's uncle or godfather or something was *Rookwood*, and Bagman idiotically passed him secrets in the first war. At least, that was what Crouch alleged. Bagman got off by saying he had no idea that Rookwood was a Death Eater."

Percy blinks, absorbing this new information. He hadn't thought to look into Crouch's life, largely because Crouch is such a plain, inscrutable man, but he supposes he really ought to do better diligence if he's to solve the mystery of whatever is killing—or driving—the man. "Well, I doubt Bagman's a Death Eater," Percy says skeptically, thinking of the large, jovial, bumbling man. "I think he's just always out for his own skin. Rookwood probably paid him for the secrets. Crouch does hate him, though; he's always glaring at him whenever they have to cross paths."

"Well, maybe he's doing the same thing again," Bill breaks in. "Bagman owes the goblins *serious* money, apparently. Too much gambling, I think. The goblins don't look very kindly to people who do not repay their debts."

Percy hadn't really considered that there might have been a spy in the Ministry. He'd always assumed that the Dark Lord heard of the Triwizard Tournament—and Harry's involvement in it—through the papers, since Rita Skeeter is covering the event at every opportunity, and then hatched a plan to interfere. It would not be particularly difficult to send Pettigrew or another Death Eater into Hogwarts to meddle with the Cup. In theory, all of the visitors to Hogwarts are carefully pre-approved, but in practice, there are so many workers from various Ministry departments and the like milling around at these events that someone could slip in unsupervised.

But perhaps Bagman was more directly involved. After all, he's all but organising the whole Tournament, and he has Death Eater connections *and* motive. Percy would not fancy being beholden to the goblins for anything.

After the drinks, Bill Apparates away, claiming an early morning at the bank, and Charlie hurries off to check on the dragons, leaving Tonks and Percy to make their chilly way to Hogwarts, where McGonagall had promised them use of her Floo. Percy could, of course, Apparate back as well, but the Madam Tonks has judged it foolish to leave her home unwarded against Apparation, and so Tonks always has to find a way to Floo home instead. Percy is older than her, in a way; he can hardly allow her to walk back alone, even if she is a perfectly competent witch. Molly Weasley, at the very least, did not raise her middle son to be churlish, unlike the rest of them.

“You know a bit about mind magic, don’t you?” Tonks asks him, uncharacteristically hesitant, as they walk down the blustery path toward the warm lights of the castle.

“A bit,” says Percy, cautiously. “I doubt I know more than you.”

“Do you know anything about Dementors?”

“Besides the obvious?” Percy tries to think why Tonks may be asking him about the Dementors but draws a blank. Something in her Auror training, perhaps? Aurors do have to spend quite a lot of time around the beasts. “Not much. I think that’s more a branch of soul magic rather than mind magic, though. Why do you ask?”

Tonks tries to keep her voice light, but it wavers, right at the end, when she asks, “Do you think it’s possible to recover from repeated exposure to—to their presence?”

“Are you concerned about having to escort prisoners to Azkaban? You really oughtn’t worry; you’d need far more repeated exposure to Dementors to worry about it affecting you in a meaningful way.”

“So what would it do if you encountered them for years?”

At this, Percy has to squint at her, alerted by the edge in her voice. “Well, we don’t really know about repeated, long-term exposure to Dementors, to be honest,” he says, trying to watch her reaction carefully without turning his whole body to face hers. “Most long term Azkaban prisoners go mad, eventually.”

Tonks stumbles over a large branch in their path but brushes aside Percy’s belated attempt to help her over it. “But you said it was not mind magic, but soul magic.”

“Well, maybe they do not go mad in the *mind*, but rather it affects the…integrity of their soul,” Percy says, this time thoughtfully. It’s an interesting point, but there’s such a dearth of literature on the topic that he isn’t even sure whether it is *true* that Azkaban prisoners go mad. “Tonks, why are you asking?”

Tonks inhales sharply and then says, her voice low and her hair darkening to a deep black, “Did Ron ever tell you about my cousin?”

Oh. Percy swallows around a suddenly dry throat as he remembers that Sirius Black is indeed Tonks’ cousin, as well as Draco’s, and of course Tonks must know by now that he is innocent. Perhaps she even sees him regularly, at the Black family house. Likely how she meets Remus. Has she already fallen in love with the older man, or will it take longer?

He shakes his head to steady himself. What he needs to focus on is the implication that Tonks is involved enough with the drama to know that Black is innocent. Is *she* in the Order already, or is this an issue of family rather than loyalty to a cause?

When he looks again to his right, he sees that Tonks is holding her wand tightly. It hurts him, a little, that she would assume he was a threat, or that she would automatically take *Black’s* side over Percy’s. His voice is sharp when he responds, “He could be dangerous, Tonks.”

“So you don’t know—”

“No, I know the whole story, more of it than you likely think I do,” Percy snaps back, irritated. “But Tonks, we don’t know how repeated long-term Dementor exposure affects his brain, or his magic, or his soul. *Be careful.*”

Tonks sighs and relaxes her grip on her wand, turning back to face the path. They begin the climb toward the gates of the castle. “He’s so sad,” she says quietly. “Lost, even. Like he doesn’t recognise what year it is, sometimes.”

“Do you see him often?”

Tonks shakes her head. “I’ve only seen him twice. My mother found him, somehow. One day I came home and he was on my couch.”

Percy grins despite himself, imagining what a scene that must have caused. “What did you do?”

“Had him in chains before Mum could tell me to stop,” Tonks admits, and there’s a small glimmer of pride lurking beneath her muted sorrow. “I dunno where he’s been, but I saw him a second time that summer, and then he’s been off somewhere. He said it wouldn’t be safe to contact us.”

“He’s definitely right,” Percy has to add. “Merlin, Tonks. You’re an *Auror*. You could be sent to Azkaban if anyone catches wind that you’ve even seen him, let alone that you and your family is *aiding* him.”

“But he *is* family, Perce.”

“So is Draco Malfoy, and I don’t see you willing to lose your job over him.”

Tonks snorts, and Percy’s shoulders relax as they once again find themselves on common ground. “Well, Sirius was also blasted off the tree, so I reckon that makes him and my mum more like family than her and Lady Malfoy. But Percy, do you know of any way that I can *help* him?”

Percy has to shrug helplessly. “I don’t know very much about Dementor magic, I’m sorry, Tonks. Maybe you can ask a Healer; pretend it’s part of your Auror training. Maybe all he needs is time.”

Tonks nods, looking glum, and says very little for the rest of the evening. Percy cannot really understand the depth of her determination, given that she’s only spoken to the man twice, but he supposes Tonks has very little family and so may feel like she has to stick to what she’s got.

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December 1994

With just about three months until the Second Task, Percy throws himself into painting with a single minded determination. He needs to be skilled enough to render the subtleties of Tom's face. Not for the first time, he thanks his lucky stars that he lives alone; his flat is papered with sketches of Tom's face as he struggles with the curve of his jaw and the bow in his upper lip.

Narcissa and he always chat before his weekly lessons, though never again about Tonks or even the Tournament. She artfully keeps the conversation light and artificial, pleasant and polite. When Percy retells the story of the scone, one weekend toward the middle of December, she covers her mouth and breaks into giggles. The next week when he's arrived, she's prepared for him a variety of foods appropriate and easy to consume for various types of meetings.

(If one wishes a meeting to be short, never order any food, merely a drink. Tea gives the impression of cordiality; alcohol turns the tenor more serious or intimate, depending on the participants. If one desires to trap the other party in conversation, order something expensive that will take time to consume).

He tells Tonks about his meetings with Narcissa, and she is quiet, thoughtful. The next time he sees her she's revealed she sent an owl to Draco. "We're cousins, and he likes you, so he can't be all bad," she reasons. "And what fourteen year old boy doesn't like having a secret from his mum?"

Crouch wastes away, seemingly even faster than Percy remembers. He's actively distracted, and at times displays a shocking lack of interest in essential activities. Percy has to take complete control over the regulations concerning international carpets, though he remembers that Crouch had taken it as a personal affront that the foreign contingent wanted to flout their transportation in front of the Muggles, creating a bureaucratic nightmare for the Obliviators.

Liam is beginning to be a bit too sure of himself, too, all things considered. Percy knows perfectly well that Liam is a Muggleborn pretending to be otherwise, so he has about a year to leave the department before it becomes unsafe. But, given that Percy has this information, he should use it carefully. It bears further consideration. He sometimes sees Liam, chatting and laughing with the purebloods that would turn on him and his people in just a few years, and wants to shake him, break that damn cheerful smile, and tell him that these people do not *care* about him. They are undoubtedly sniggering about Liam behind his back, trading nasty barbs as to the untidiness of Liam's Muggle trainers or wide ties, his lower-brow ways. Percy burns with second-hand embarassment to think of it, and he cannot understand why Liam persists in being friends with them despite the class divide that separates them.

Aside from learning that Crouch’s wife died shortly after their son, Percy does not find very much more of interest in the papers to suggest why Crouch may be dying. Percy does take a leaf out of Tonks’ book and watches Barty Crouch Jr’s trial; it’s a horrid business, and Percy feels sick to his stomach the entire evening. Barty’s wild, careening laugh; the hard set of Crouch’s face as he looks at his own son; the poor Longbottoms, tortured to insanity.

He dreams of Barty's laugh that night, and Tom's laugh too, and dark snakes writhing their way across the sky and slipping under the hoods of Dementors blocking out the moonlight. The dark circles under his eyes grow more and more pronounced each night, and he takes to spelling his appearance whenever he can.

Bagman is never in his office. Percy chats up Bagman's assistant, a Ravenclaw witch a few years older than he, and she reveals to him casually that Bagman is in the process of selling off his family property. Given that Rookwood is still in Azkaban, Percy cannot imagine who Bagman may be selling information to, but he supposes that plenty of the original Death Eaters are still out and about, enjoying their largesse and privileged positions in society.

Percy contemplates the idea of asking Diggory about Bagman's trouble with the goblins, but every time Percy drops by his department to add to the reports he is compiling for Crouch, Diggory watches him with dark, distrustful eyes. Percy has no idea what he's done in this timeline to cause such suspicion, unless his father has been telling tales about him behind his back, which is downright insulting.

The night before the Yule Ball, Percy breaks into Crouch's office.

It's surprisingly easy. Percy has the proper security credentials, and he's begun to work late. It can only help if he has the reputation of being a bit of a stickler, always at the office, always scrupulously correct. (Last week, he cited Liam for wearing trainers under his robes, which *is* technically against the employee guidelines).

So nobody questions him when he levitates a large stack of nasty looking papers through the office at nine in the evening. "The new bill for cauldron regulation," Percy explains to the night guard outside the Department of International Cooperation, and the man grins and wishes Percy luck.

"It'll take me all night," Percy says, shaking his head. "And I can't even take them home because they're marked as sensitive."

"I won't dob on you if you have a bottle or two," the guard says, holding open the door.

Drinking is strictly against employee regulations, but Percy only smiles and walks through with his stack of papers. He opens Crouch's door with his wand, keyed to the man's wards, and then separates the stacks into several substacks, in case anyone walks in and wants to see proof that he's been working.

Crouch's office is bare. No pictures, of course. He has three bookshelves, all with incredibly dry looking tomes on magical law or international regulations. His enchanted window is firmly bolted shut, though as a Department Head he could be authorised for basically any view. His chair is leather and delightfully soft, his desk is a deep, beautiful walnut, and each of its four drawers are locked.

Well, Percy isn't a two time Hogwarts graduate for nothing.

He first casts what has become one of his favourite spells: what he first used, back in his fourth year, to see which key Flitwick enchanted to the door. All four drawers light up a

blazing blue, indicating they've been enchanted defensively by the same person. But they each have an orange tinge, which would imply somebody else has recently done precisely what Percy is attempting now.

Crouch *does* have enemies and has been acting more than a little odd this year. Percy supposes it is not out of the question that someone wants to see what secrets he hides.

The drawers, he soon finds, are keyed to Crouch's wand. This is an important discovery and indicates a key weakness in Crouch's defences. They are not tied to his *magic*, meaning anybody with his wand could breach the wards.

Percy, unfortunately, does not have Crouch's wand. After eventually concluding he won't be able to *open* the drawer, he makes a valiant attempt to be clever.

His studies with McGonagall on elemental magic and Transfiguration have left him with a strong understanding of most related material. However, even employing his full repertoire of spells, he's able only to ascertain that the contents of the top two drawers are thin sheets of inorganic material: parchment, most likely. The bottom drawer has something solid and metal that Percy would guess to be a key. The last drawer seems to have glass, lots of it. Vials, if Percy had to guess. Likely Crouch was taking a stimulant; he certainly would not be the first.

Percy stands in front of the desk. Again, he surveys the room. Bookshelves. He tips some of the books back, but he doesn't see anything hidden behind. None of them appear to be well-used, judging by the uniform layer of dust coating their spines.

In fact, much of the room is dusty, even though Percy was under the impression that Crouch was using it often. His eyes land on the wide, ornate grate under the enchanted window. Perhaps Crouch walks into his office, turns on the lights, and goes back to his home? Crouch could, conceivably, be the type to turn down the house elf cleaning services offered to all Department Heads. Percy would believe Crouch is paranoid enough to not want even a Ministry-employed house elf near his personal property.

Enchanted window, locked. Percy ignores it as he completes a slow turn. There's a large brass floor lamp next to the desk. Keep turning; there's the door, perfectly ordinary. Next to the door on the right is a small table holding up a basket, right under the pipe where memos shoot out. The basket is full; Percy crosses the room and rifles through it. Several of the notes were sent by him, and presumably ignored! Well.

Keep turning; don't lose focus now. But turning brings the bookshelves yet again into focus. Next to the bookshelf there is a large, ornate chest. Percy examines it carefully, but none of his unlocking charms have any sort of effect. He notes the pure iron keyhole, covered in tiny runes. It’s a standard Wizarding chest, tied to a specific wand and key combination. He won’t be able to open it without extreme force.

Percy sighs out loud and goes back to the basket. At least if he sees where the pileup began he can theorise when this whole illness started.

Memos about the Tournament; these Percy copies and sets aside. Lots of missives about the carpet controversy, of course. Some notes from Bagman, begging for an audience. Invitations

from foreign Ministries that Crouch really should be accepting; Percy pulls out his planner and jots down some reminders to at least apologise for not responding. Requisition forms; courtesy notices in advance of department bills being due; monthly meeting invitations; the type of mundane notifications that are required to keep the wheels of a large, complex government organisation turning.

And at the bottom of the pile, there's a note from Bertha Jorkins, letting Crouch know she'll be stopping by his house tomorrow to get his signature on some time sensitive documents.

The note is signed from one week before her trip to Albania.

***

Percy must be insane, because he is currently contemplating the wisdom of spying on his manager's house.

He's not doing it, of course. He's back in his flat, sitting on the couch in the main room and staring at the note from Bertha.

Mr. Crouch:

Will be stopping by your house tomorrow at 10 AM. Urgently need signatures on the permissions to staff Obliviators at the World Cup. My apologies; turns out under the new regulations HBZ-3206 we need to certify each individual Obliviator rather than authorise a block.

Thanks,

Bertha

That's all it is. Perfectly mundane; Percy remembers regulation HBZ-3206, since one of *his* jobs had been to reference the budget and work out how many Obliviators they could afford to hire (answer: eight). Bertha really ought to have had the permissions signed well before June, considering the new regulation took effect the previous April, but it could have conceivably slipped her mind.

Stopping by Crouch's *house* is a tad unusual, but not entirely unheard of at the Ministry. Especially with the intimacy afforded by Floo, it was not unusual for colleagues to poke their heads into each other's fireplaces before meetings or at the end of the day. Actually showing *up* to a house is a bit more bold, but if Bertha was truly desperate—and she would have been, if the permission forms were still unsigned just weeks before the event—she might risk Crouch's ire for his signatures.

There's no *proof* that this meeting spurred Bertha's trip. Except…when he had spoken to Crouch about her, Crouch hadn't mentioned she'd come by his house a week before she left. Not that he *had* to mention it, per se, but Bertha, being a chatty sort, likely would have

mentioned to Crouch that she was leaving for Albania in a week. Percy had checked the employee logs; no record of vacation days taken by Bertha.

And so something about the whole situation is just a bit *fishy*.

Maybe Crouch snapped at her, and Bertha fled for vacation, her feelings hurt. Had those forms ever been signed? Had there been Obliviators at the Cup? There must have been. Maybe Bertha had been too intimidated to speak to Crouch, or he didn't remember she'd mentioned Albania.

There's no real reason to think that something went wrong during that meeting, something nefarious. And therefore Percy *is* a bit mad, since he's considering spying on Crouch's house anyway.

***

In the end, he doesn't spy on Crouch's house, but taking a leaf from Bertha's book, he appears with some forms he 'forgot' to sign for the Yule Ball. (The actual forms are, of course, already signed and in his office, but he had waited to submit them on the off chance that Crouch was actually paying any meaningful attention to the Tournament).

Crouch is not in, though he had not come into the office, either. He has a nice house in one of the Wizarding suburbs fairly near to the Longbottom Manor, though it is not as nice as Percy would have expected from the Crouch family. Perhaps they have a Manor somewhere else entirely.

Percy knocks on the door smartly, trying to look for the televisor charm as if he is here on perfectly innocuous business. When there is no response, he knocks again with more force.

Nothing.

Stepping off the main pathway and moving toward the side of the house—he could, conceivably, want to check if Crouch were in the back garden—Percy unobtrusively casts a few spells. To his surprise he finds that very little magic has been cast in the house at all for at least the last few days, though he would not be able to tell more without more in-depth study. Perhaps Crouch is on vacation or in hospital?

Percy peers over the low iron fence into Crouch's backyard. It is empty; there is some space where perhaps once a flower or vegetable garden lived, and an old rusting lawn chair, but nothing else.

Percy worries his lip between his teeth. He desperately wants to go inside, but would that be too difficult to explain? Crouch must have charms to detect intruders. Would he be too angry at Percy for walking in, or would he accept Percy's Tournament excuse as sufficient?

He compromises by casting a more complex version of his earlier charm. It uses enough magic that Crouch's wards may pick up on it, but he thinks he can explain that more easily than breaking and entering. The magic spreads throughout the house like grey mist. After a second later, pockets of mist change colour; outside, where Percy is, a deep yellow hovers near the gate, as if someone just like Percy lingered to cast detection spells. Inside, shades of blue coalesce near some of the doors and in the kitchen. So Crouch has been inside, but not often enough over the last few days for his magic to show in the simpler variant of the spell.

With one last look at the house, Percy disappears. He will plan to return in a few days and see if it is still vacant. Crouch could have travelled for the holidays, though to do so without leaving word is strange, to say the least.

***

The Yule Ball: glittering, glamorous, glacial. Percy picks at his food, watching Ron and Harry sulk with only minimal amusement.

He'd tried to meet with Snape, and once again the older man had snapped at him to leave him in *peace.* Percy can't let that stand, of course. He needs to know—he *deserved* to know—what news there was from Pettigrew, from Dumbledore. He isn't a child, able to be dismissed and pushed aside because Snape is under a great deal of pressure.

Myrtle isn't anywhere to be seen. The ghosts were having their own party, apparently, and Percy was not invited. Her bathroom was cold and damp in her absence, and Percy had stood there for several long seconds, looking at the familiar way the light filters green through the tall slit windows, before he'd reluctantly turned around and left *it* in peace. Perhaps Percy is the only one *not* at peace these days.

And so Percy feels almost as forlorn as his youngest brother, watching the girl he likes dance with his Quidditch hero, if Percy had liked a girl in years, if Percy watched Quidditch.

"It's not fair," Ron mutters again to Harry, stabbing a green bean with particular vehemence. The food on all three plates have long gone cold, but neither wizard moves to reheat it with a warming charm. Percy eyes their plates but does not offer. His own, he pushes aside; he finds himself eating less and less these days.

"Just tell her you fancy her," says Percy tiredly. Harry had perked up earlier when Dumbledore had stopped by their table, but when the older wizard had left, the Boy Who Lived had deflated almost immediately. Percy does not like to see it.

Ron goes a predictable scarlet. "I don't fancy her!"

Harry eyes Ron doubtfully and reaches for his goblet. His date, a pretty Indian girl in an elaborate and ornate pink sari, twirls laughing in the arms of a handsome French boy in sky

blue robes. Her twin—Ron's date, somehow—is equally radiant in orange. They look much older and sophisticated than Harry and Ron, slouched at the table. Percy had winced when he'd seen Ron's terrible outfit, though that hadn't prevented him from making several mental notes to share with Aunt Muriel the next time he sees her.

From across the room, Percy notices Bagman walking toward him purposefully, having just shaken off Fred and George. Percy has no interest in being implicated with Bagman; after what Bill had told them about Bagman's piling debts, his conflict with the goblins, and of course that fishy business with Crouch trying to implicate Bagman for passing information in the first war to Rookwood—Percy is going to stay as far away from the man as he can.

"I'm going for a walk," Percy announces. "You're welcome to sit here and watch your dates."

The two teenagers exchange looks and scramble after him. The rose garden is at least cooler than the stifling Great Hall, though there are far too many giggling couples for Percy's tastes. A bug buzzes near his head and he stuns it irritably with a *Stupefy*, one of the few offensive spells he's mastered wordlessly *and* wandlessly.

"It's Snape," Ron hisses suddenly, stopping abruptly.

Percy refocuses on his surroundings. Indeed, Snape's voice, as malevolently upset as it was earlier, filters through the bushes up ahead.

"I don't see what there is to fuss about, Igor," Snape says coolly.

Percy exchanges a glance with Ron and then Harry. With their unanimous support, he lifts a quiet privacy charm while they press closer to Percy.

"Severus, you cannot pretend this isn't happening!" Karkaroff says anxiously. "It's been getting clearer and clearer for months. I am becoming seriously concerned, I can't deny it—"

Percy frowns.

"Then flee," says Snape's voice curtly. "Flee; I will make your excuses. I, however, am remaining at Hogwarts."

There's a brief scuffle; Snape takes points from a Ravenclaw girl, his voice full of dark glee.

Harry shifts but Percy grabs his robes and pulls him closer to himself. His privacy shield is not particularly large, and he senses the conversation is not over.

"But Severus, that would be suicide," Karkaroff says urgently.

"My life is to do with as I wish," Snape says icily. "And yours, Igor? To whom does your life belong?"

"Severus...I named you, in the trial. You'll die, either way."

Snape laughs. It is not kind. "I know the answer to my question, even if you do not, Igor. Flee, then. It may be the last thing you do, but you shall die a free man."

"And you, Severus? You will die in service?"

"I will die when I can do nothing else."

The two men walk off, and Percy cancels the privacy charm. Harry's face is drawn and white; Ron looks at him nervously and then to Percy.

Percy shakes his head in response to the unspoken question. He has his suspicions as to what the two men were discussing, but no certainties, and he certainly is not going to share his guesses with Ron and Harry.

"Karkaroff is a Death Eater," Harry says abruptly. "Sirius told me."

Percy eyes Harry. Does he not know Snape was one too? He must, particularly if he is corresponding with Sirius Black. "Many of the prominent figures in our society were accused," Percy says neutrally. "Many claimed Imperius, which is impossible to detect after the spell has ended."

"Like Malfoy's dad," says Ron wisely, nodding.

Harry snorts. "He *definitely* wasn't under an Imperius."

"Nobody knows," says Percy, beginning to herd the boys back into the Great Hall. He wants to be alone, to think through what he'd just heard. "The point is, there are always undercurrents to the truth. Nothing is ever simple."

He leaves them discussing the matter over the punch bowl—Percy catches a whiff and knows immediately someone has spiked it, most likely the twins—and then quietly leaves the room. He's done his task, technically: he helped open the ceremony, he was Crouch's representative at the ball, and he showed his face long enough to be recognized.

Now he wants to be alone.

Percy wanders the castle, thinking about Snape. It seems increasingly clear the man is hiding something from him, likely whatever is blackening his mood more than usual. Maybe it's the knowledge that the Dark Lord will soon return and Snape will be pressed into service once more. *It's been getting clearer and clearer for months*. Can he—truly trust Snape?

Percy hesitates on the staircase and then chooses to walk up rather than down. On the seventh floor, he pauses and briefly considers the Room of Hidden Things but he doesn't want to open it and see ash or remember how idiotic and impulsive he was, perhaps to all of their detriment.

He keeps walking up, and up, and up, until there is no more up to go.

From the heights of the Astronomy tower, the rest of the castle is small and still and silent. The walk to Hogsmeade is lit with floating lights and tall fir trees dotted with snow, the pathway a small curling snake from Percy's vantage point. From up here, he can breathe more freely, as if his problems were smaller and more remote, like the small dark figures moving around on the ground.

So what if Snape does not include him in his plans. Percy has gotten this far with the other man's help, and he certainly does not need it to continue. At this stage in the long, complicated game that he and Snape are playing, there is no point in distrusting Snape. Percy has already told Snape enough that if Snape were lying to him, there would be no hope of salvaging the timeline.

"Lady Ravenclaw," he says into the air, on the off chance that ghosts know when they are summoned. Myrtle certainly has a talent for appearing at the opportune—or inopportune, he supposes—moment. "I need to speak with you."

A pause, just long enough for Percy to look back down at the dark and expansive grounds, feeling bitter that he is being ignored *yet again*, and then a dreadful chill falls over the whole landing, despite the warm cloak that Percy is wearing to protect himself against the brisk December air.

"L-Lady Ravenclaw?"

"You will not speak to her again," says a voice, low and soft and dangerous, hissing like a potion about to pop and boil. Percy spins around, wand out, but nobody is there.

"Hominum revelio," he casts, but again, nothing.

The voice laughs rustily. "I am no human, boy."

Percy grips his wand tighter and raises a shield. ***Be bold***, whispers Tom. Percy tries to project confidence into his voice. "Show yourself. I command it."

"Why do you wish to speak to Lady Ravenclaw?"

Percy keeps his wand out, scanning the room slowly. "My business is my own."

With a rattle of chains, the Bloody Baron materialises into being. Percy takes a step backward, still holding onto his wand. His shield flickers but then snaps back to the confines of his body. The Baron is tall, taller than Percy would expect from a ghost from his time, and his ancient robes are ornate and covered with silvery blood. The chains he is infamous for are wrapped tightly around his arms, rattling ominously with every shift.

"Sir," Percy gasps out in surprise.

The Baron ignores him. "You will not speak to her," he repeats, taking a slow, gliding step toward Percy. His voice is low and intent, and Percy feels the hairs on the back of his neck bristle in warning. "What is it you need to know?"

Percy has never known the Baron to *speak* before. He licks his dry lips and attempts, "Do you know of what was hidden here?"

"Many things are hidden here," the Baron replies. Again his chains rattle; again he moves closer with that slow, steady glide. Percy takes another step back. "But I know of what tortured her."

“I need to know when it was—corrupted,” he says, feeling his back bump against the cold, thin railing that separates him from certain death. There may be a charm to protect students from falling, but then again, there may not be, and Percy is not feeling particularly lucky.

His statement stops the Baron, at least temporarily, and Percy takes the opportunity to step slightly away from the railing. “Why?”

“I need to know in order to destroy it.”

The Baron looks at Percy, his chains pooling by his feet. Percy tries to raise his chin and look back, though he wants nothing more than to dash away. The Baron’s attention is colder than Myrtle’s, or even the Grey Lady’s. Standing next to him makes Percy feel as though he has plunged into a very old and very still lake in the middle of winter, the type of lake told of in tales of King Arthur or Merlin, with a scaled tail flickering just out of sight as an ancient monster dives to its depths. He shivers despite himself.

Finally, the ghost speaks. “You wish to destroy it.”

“Yes.” Percy hesitates and then adds, “We *need* to destroy it.”

“It is not the only one of its kind.”

Percy blinks. “Do you know the others?”

The Baron shakes his head, slowly and with an air of finality. “I do not *know.*”

"Well, I can't say why, but it's important that I know when this was created, as accurately as possible," Percy says, urgently.

"He brought it with him when he requested to join the staff," the Baron replies, the air suddenly leaving his ghostly lungs in a sonorous hiss. "I do not know the year; I have not known the year for many centuries."

Percy nods gratefully. "Thank you, sir."

The Bloody Baron inclines his head. He begins sinking through the floor and then pauses, only his torso showing. "Destroy them all."

"That's the plan, sir."

The Baron looks up and meets his gaze for the first time. The weight of it sears. "*All of them*," he repeats. "Do not falter."

"I won't," he says, startled, as the Baron sinks away as if settling into a murky marsh.

Young Tom, then. Snape would know the date, or at least be able to find it.

Percy's halfway to the dungeons before it occurs to him to wonder why the Baron came when he called.

***

Percy is forced to visit Snape again in the morning, on account of professors being forced to stay at the Yule Ball until its conclusion. He's not very enthused about it; the only thing worse than confronting Snape is confronting him the day after a night chaperoning drunk teenagers.

Percy wakes early and fritters away the entire morning by rehearsing what he's going to say. He strides purposefully to the dungeons; he knocks firmly on Snape's office door; and he enters with authority.

"The Dark Lord is gaining strength," Snape says without preamble, cutting him off at the knees before he can even hope to stand. "My Mark is darkening. That is what you came to ask, is it not? I saw your pathetic attempt at a privacy ward last night."

Percy contemplates a variety of answers before saying, cautiously, "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to spy."

Snape gives him a derisive look but continues, turning to the empty chalkboard as if he's reading from his lesson plans. "Igor is a fool; he's unlikely to survive the next year, if this timeline proceeds as we expect. I do not believe he entered Potter's name. He does not want the Dark Lord to return."

"Why?"

"He fled the service; he named names," Snape says simply. "The only reward for his cowardice will be death."

"But Malfoy, Greengrass, Nott. They all pled Imperius."

Snape barks out a tired laugh. "The Dark Lord may even be amused by that defence. Igor may survive, if he is willing to turn Durmstrang into a stronghold for the Dark Lord, but his control on the school is far more tenuous than he thinks. No. Death is certain."

"Are you...fine with that, sir?"

Snape turns and gives Percy a poisonous glare. "Are you *fine* with Crouch dying?"

"That's inevitable," stammers Percy, taken aback.

Snape turns to the board again, clasping his hands behind his back. "So is this." He gives Percy only a minute to process before he continues. "So, the new year abounds. We have no news from Pettigrew, but whatever he's doing must be working. We must assume the plan remains the same. I have been monitoring the Map, but I see no extraneous names."

The Map is laying open on Snape's desk. Percy takes it and scans, but everything does as it should. McGonagall is in her quarters, likely sleeping off a hangover; most of the students are in their dorms, doing the same. Dumbledore isn't on the Map that Percy can see, though he was there at the ball last night. Sprout is in the greenhouses; Flitwick is in the Ravenclaw Common Room. Moody is in his office.

"What do you say of my theory that Dumbledore is responsible?"

"Increasingly plausible," replies Snape, still surveying the endless canvas of an empty blackboard. Percy wonders what he's seeing inscribed in his mind. "I believe it may also have been Moody."

"*Moody?"*

"Moody is acting with more than his usual paranoia," Snape says, and the sneer curling his lip is enough to hint to Percy what, exactly, has been driving Snape into heightened levels of irritation. "He's being deliberately belligerent with me and Igor, and I've spotted him trying to cozy up to Potter."

"But why would he enter Harry in the Tournament?"

Snape sighs, as if the very effort of explaining to Percy requires more energy than he can bear. He turns, and with excruciating slowness, takes the three steps to his desk, pulls out his chair, and then perches on the edge. Only then does he look up and meet Percy's eyes. "Bait."

"Bait," Percy repeats.

"Nobody hates Dark wizards more than Alastor Moody," Snape explains, his mouth small and compressed. "And what better way to draw out Dark wizards than to dangle the Boy Who Lived, vulnerable and alone, in a dangerous magical contest?"

"Do you think Dumbledore would know of this?"

Snape shrugs one shoulder. "Moody is Albus' man, through and through—but he disagrees often with him. He thinks Albus needs to be more decisive. This may be the kind of plan that Moody uses to win support for his goals, that is, to establish an Auror presence in Hogwarts and begin preparing for the second war."

Percy thinks about what's to come. "That's not a bad idea, actually."

Snape slams his hand on the desk with some force, causing Percy to jump where he stands. "It's a terrible idea," he hisses vehemently. "The last thing we want to do is telegraph to the Dark Lord that we're preparing for his return. *Think,* boy. What is He likely to do if he believes we're ready for him?"

Percy knows what he would do, first thing. It's something he's always wondered about the Horcruxes: why have them so inaccessible? "Check on the Horcruxes."

"We have to assume the Dark Lord can sense their destruction, since we do not know otherwise. But consider the disaster it would be if He took the rest into his stronghold before

we even knew what they were. No. Our only advantage is that He thinks we will be unprepared for him. We need to ensure it remains that way."

"Strike only where He cannot see," Percy completes, nodding. He starts to bring up his dilemma, whether to purposefully estrange himself for his family or not, but then closes his mouth abruptly. He's not so sure he wants to know what Snape thinks.

Snape takes advantage of Percy's silence to steeple his fingers and regard Percy thoughtfully. "You truly believe this portrait will be successful?"

"Yes," Percy says instantly. He takes a seat on the opposite side of the desk and reaches into his bag for one of the books that he'd brought to bolster his argument. "We do not know where the others could be." He sees Snape start to open his mouth and then quickly continues. "We *can't* wait for Dumbledore. What if he does not tell Harry until he is of age? We do not know whether you ever knew about them." What remains unsaid is that Dumbledore is almost certainly aware now what the diary is and has yet to confide in Snape. Likely he never will.

"And you think this portrait will be of use."

Percy flips to a section in the book, marked by a slender leather bookmark. He points to the relevant section and leans back while Snape peruses it intently.

Snape exhales through his nose heavily. "This is a risk," he says, one long finger tapping the text. "The skill required to even *animate* the portrait may very well be beyond our reach. The audacity to assume that we can do so with purpose is—well, unthinkable."

What the text says is this:

Humans are notoriously mercurial; portraits are but shades of living people. A skilled portrait master can imbue his work with a convincing facsimile of emotion, but he should take care not to accidentally allow his own to take precedence.

What Percy understands is this:

It is possible, somehow, to imbue one's own emotions in a work. Perhaps he can make Tom more pliable—or at least receptive to Percy's friendship.

"The risk is fairly low," Percy persists. "The largest risk is, admittedly, that we destroy the diadem in the process—but I think it is unlikely that He can feel their destruction, given that the Trio, somehow, managed to destroy them all without the Dark Lord noticing."

"That is mere conjecture."

Percy forges on. "A portrait—especially in a place with only *one* portrait—is highly limited in scope. It cannot go anywhere, or cast magic. It can only speak."

"It can lie," says Snape. "Consider that it will lie, and we will die while following its instructions."

“We don’t need to turn off our brains,” argues Percy. “Even its misdirection could be informative.”

“Where would we keep it? In Hogwarts, where it may be seen at all times? In your apartment, where it’s liable to worm its way into your head as capably as its sixteen year old predecessor?”

Percy flushes. He had been thinking he’d keep it in his apartment, where he could speak to it freely, like he did Tom. But not to—*confide* in it, or seek *validation*, or anything like Snape’s imagining. But Percy got more out of Tom than Ginny could, or Harry, or Snape. He understands Tom, at least the younger version of Tom, so wrapped up in his ideas of glory and power and influence. Having him there would be useful.

Snape eyes him. “You are already in his thrall.”

“I am not,” Percy exclaims, his head shooting up. “Gringotts, then,” he says, hoping the idea sounds well-reasoned and not like he just thought of it. “We’ll put it in my vault in Gringotts.”

Snape purses his lips and leans back slightly. Percy, having taken over a decade of lessons with the man, knows perfectly well that this means he’s taking Percy’s ideas seriously.

“You will paint it first,” he concedes. “I believe it will take me much of the term to complete the potion. We cannot hurry this process, Mr. Weasley.”

“Percy,” he corrects as a matter of course, though without much hope.

Snape ignores him, but Percy is too elated at Snape’s acquiescence to mind too much.

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January 1995

Mr. Barrington is not *exactly* how Percy would imagine a master portrait artist, but he's close: tall, thin, and very old, with a shock of grey hair and gnarled fingertips. His voice rarely rises above a hoarse whisper, and despite the clear case of advanced arthritis in his wrinkled hands, his hands are steady and firm while holding the paintbrush.

“To make a true portrait, the brush itself must be a wand,” he tells Percy, turning over the brush that he uses. “You must focus on your subject and allow your magic to flow into every stroke, every line.”

“Do you need to know your subject well, sir?”

Barrington shakes his head, his thumb smoothing over the bristles at the end of the brush. “No, although it helps. The potion is what replicates the subject, imbues your painting with

something *more*. Yes, Mr. Weasley, to become a master portrait artist is more than applying paint to a blank canvas. It takes many years of study. You must be capable of sustaining a meditative state for hours on end, allowing your magic to move freely throughout your body. You must bring it to the surface and keep it there, tethered."

Percy nods slowly, committing it to memory.

"I do not take on many students, Mr. Weasley. For trifles such as this—for you realise, I hope, your painting of your father will be merely *animated*, not *alive*—I believe most can learn, with the requisite instruction, to replicate what we see on the page. But I will not take on a student who wishes to be a master unless they are truly worthy."

Percy has not quite planned that far. In truth, he knows he will likely need to complete the portrait of Tom on his own; he cannot risk a single person other than Snape knowing of his plans. But the art calls to him nevertheless, and he will not rule out the possibility that he may one day come to this wizened old man and beg him to take him as a student.

"I wish to be worthy," he says intently. Beside them, the painting of Arthur—still in its rudimentary stages—smiles serenely.

"We shall see," Barrington says.

***

He dreams of Tom, sometimes. His flat is papered with sketches of Tom's face, of rudimentary attempts at painting him, of the way his eyes flash and his lips purse and the arresting stillness of his gaze.

He smells the paints constantly: in the middle of the night, shifting on his pillow; in the Ministry, wafting from his fingers as he shuffles papers; in the morning, lingering on his robes as he pulls them on over his clothes.

Bring me back, says Tom, in the middle of the night, his voice urgent and low. ***I need you to help me, Percy.***

He wakes with an ache in his throat and an uncomfortable uneasiness in his stomach, the feeling of a sob caught before it erupts, a prickly, uneasy impatience dusting his collarbone, and finds his fingers clenched tightly around his wand as if it were his brush.

***

The new year brings surprisingly mild weather. Percy, whose moods often track the weather closely—dampening and sobering as the sky turns dark, and lightening whenever a few inspired beams of sun break through the foggy overhead—spends as much of the weekend as he can outside. England's winter weather is more preferable to him than the tumultuous, stormy Scotland, but he still wishes sometimes that it didn't *rain* all the bloody time. Perhaps when this war is over, he'll pack up and move to the south of France, somewhere where the sun shines for more of the year, yet there isn't the heavy oppressive heat that Bill suffered through in Egypt.

The new year also brings an unpleasant surprise. Amos Diggory is found dead, the Diggory home unexpectedly bursting into flames on one of the rare sunny evenings that Percy has been enjoying so. Percy lingers behind the squad of Aurors called to the scene and Apparates a few minutes after them, not least because the Diggory residence is so close to the Burrow. His father is there too, likely for the same reason, and after both Weasleys get snapped at by the lead Auror when they try to enter the still-smoking house, they stand outside, shoulder to shoulder, and watch.

"Priscilla wasn't there," Arthur tells Percy in an undertone, watching sadly as the Aurors struggle with a combined hydration spell. Percy would tell the lead Auror that he needs a firmer wrist, and that the other three need to join the spell at precisely the same time rather than staggering their incantations, but he has already been told once to *bugger off* and does not need to invite the same response twice. "She was in Hogsmeade, apparently. Crouch authorised some of the parents to visit their children after that horrid Rita Skeeter article. Molly tried to get authorised for Harry, but he refused." Arthur hesitates, but Percy can hear the next question as clearly as if his father had shouted it from the crumbling rooftops.

"No, I didn't tell Mr. Crouch to keep Mother off the list," Percy responds irritably. "I didn't know she'd asked. I didn't know the parents were in Hogsmeade at all." He *should* have known, unless Crouch had deputised the task to Liam.

Arthur clears his throat and turns the subject back to the Diggorys, rightfully uncomfortable at his own son catching him in such a blatant display of distrust. "Amos stayed behind, Merlin knows why. Can't imagine he would have missed a chance to see Cedric. But I suppose he had a meeting with the goblins later today; likely that'll be cancelled, which I'm sure will tick them off. Goblins aren't exactly the patient sort."

Percy narrows his eyes. He does not need to be an Auror to find this whole fiasco rather suspicious. *Goblins* makes him think immediately of Bagman, of course. Perhaps Bagman is actually a Death Eater and organised the murder of Amos Diggory? Percy can hardly believe it of the man, but then again, appearances *can* be deceiving. Crouch certainly doesn't trust Bagman, for obvious reasons, and Bagman is not overly fond of Crouch either, given that Crouch was the one who tried to lock Bagman up in Azkaban.

Percy goes with Crouch to meet with Cedric and Priscilla and inform him of Amos' death. It is a horrid scene that turns Percy's stomach. Priscilla dissolves into sobs almost immediately, and even Crouch's impassive demeanour cracks and he looks openly uncomfortable. Cedric tears up, too, his face turning blotchy and red, and he suddenly looks much younger than his seventeen years.

The worst bit of the whole thing is that Crouch tells Cedric that he can't drop out of the Tournament. "Magically, you're bound, I'm afraid," Crouch says, and perhaps Percy is imagining the glimmer of frustration in Crouch's eyes. Does Crouch think of his own son when he looks at Cedric? Crouch had not let his own flesh and blood off the hook when it came to serving time for his crimes, so Percy cannot imagine that he'd let Cedric drop from the Tournament, even if he were allowed.

Later, when Percy is back in his apartment, avoiding looking at Tom's painted eyes, he thinks again of Cedric with a great lurch in his stomach. If all goes according to plan, Cedric is going to die at the end of the year too, and then Priscilla Diggory will be all alone. Oh, Merlin. Percy has been trying to convince himself all year that Cedric *has* to die; they honestly, truly, unfortunately cannot be certain that the Dark Lord does not need a sacrifice to come back to life, and if that sacrifice won't be Cedric, how can Percy *pick* a replacement?

But how can Percy let Cedric just walk to his death?

But the Dark Lord *has* to return. He *has* to return, otherwise he may return at another time, when they are not prepared for it, and do not have the upper hand. Percy knows that if he were to raise the point of Cedric to Snape again, Snape would tell him crisply and shortly that sacrifices are necessary in a war, as regrettable as they may be.

Percy blinks away tears and turns back to the portrait of Tom. Perhaps if he can finish the portrait quickly enough, Tom could give them a hint as to what potion the Dark Lord uses to return, and they can determine if a sacrifice truly is needed.

***

February 1995

But before Percy can really begin in earnest on Tom's painting, there's the Second Task to get through.

In all honesty, after the excitement of the First Task, the rest are fairly boring. There's nothing to see below the lake; Percy muses idly that they really ought to have cast some Televisor charms.

Bagman is at the Task. Strictly speaking he's not in charge of the Tournament, though as Head of the Department of Games, it is technically in his purview. Percy greets him and then goes to sit next to Professor McGonagall, who's looking a bit anxious. Percy scans the crowd, but Crouch has not yet arrived.

"You didn't happen to see Potter on your way here?"

Percy checks his watch. The Task is scheduled to begin in five minutes. The other Champions are by the lake, shivering and talking among themselves in low tones, but Harry is nowhere

to be found.

“Do you think he’s skipping?” Percy asks, only to be interrupted by the spectacle of Harry Potter tearing his way as if possessed across the grounds, still dressed in his Gryffindor robes.

McGonagall rolls her eyes tartly and relaxes in her seat. “There is something to be said about the provision banning underage boys,” she sniffs. “No sense of time.”

Percy watches Harry cram a slimy green plant into his mouth. Gillyweed? Surprisingly clever for Harry, who as far as Percy knows isn’t a particularly skilled Potioneer.

“Severus is looking at you like you’ve ruined his potion,” says McGonagall conversationally as Harry grows gills, falls choking to the ground, and sticks his head underwater with a relieved flinch of his body. Really not a very inspired performance by the Boy Who Lived.

Percy shifts to meet Snape’s gaze—and then whips his head around back to face the lake. He mentally reviews his last few weeks but can’t think what he could have *possibly* done to merit such a hate-filled glare.

“I haven’t the slightest idea what I’ve done,” Percy admits.

McGonagall quirks her lips. “You’d better run when this is all over, then.”

Fleur emerges, spluttering and angry. She sits, impossibly beautiful wrapped in a towel by the side of the lake, and glowers darkly at its depths. Percy eyes her. He has absolutely no idea how she and Bill even meet, let alone get married. He hadn't been at the wedding, and in this timeline it's growing increasingly unlikely he'll be at this one.

(Because it just makes *sense*, really. His family is well protected; they have each other; they have Dumbledore. Much better to have a spy on the inside).

Krum is next. McGonagall murmurs in appreciation of his half-Transfiguration.

"Though I really wonder how his legs powered that head," she says quietly to Percy, who snorts. Hermione watches interestedly as Krum casts a spell nonverbally—or in shark language—and the grey skin melts away.

Then Cedric, whose Bubblehead Charm is perfectly accurate, though lacking style. Cho Chang doesn't seem to care, if her adoring gaze is any indication. Cedric smiles weakly at her and then glances toward the stands. It does not take a Legilimens to know that he is seeking out his mother, who has a conspicuously empty seat next to her for Amos. Percy watches as Cedric turns dispiritedly back to Cho, who reaches out with one slender finger to trace over the bow of his lower lip as she murmurs quietly to him, an intimate gesture that coaxes a smile out of the teenager.

"Where is that blasted boy," grumbles McGonagall, shifting uncomfortably in the brisk February air, as Harry refuses to materialise.

"He's not in any real danger, is he?"

McGonagall shakes her head. "Well, if he does something remarkably stupid, like remain in the bottom of the lake when whatever *thing* he took wears off, he'll be beyond saving, but nothing in that lake would purposefully kill a student, and your brother will be perfectly safe regardless."

"Bagman thought of the tasks, didn't he?"

"I believe so," she says. They share a glance of mutual commiseration before McGonagall, looking again at her watch, proposes they move closer to the water's edge.

Harry emerges minutes later, gasping, Ron and the Delacour girl bobbing next to him. Despite himself, Percy feels a bit of relief.

(Ron does not appreciate Percy's efforts to get him properly dried and examined by Madam Pomfrey, as if he were not a fourteen year old boy tied up underwater for a full hour! Percy ignores all of Ron's moans and doesn't release him back into Harry's care until he's been properly taken care of by the hospital matron.

Harry, of course, remains soaking wet, having made absolutely no effort on a drying charm. Honestly, the boy seems to forget he's a wizard. Luckily, Madam Pomfrey is on his case next).

There's a furious consultation that Percy is unfortunately excluded from, though Crouch—wan as usual—seems to have several things to say. Percy catches Dumbledore's gaze by accident and turns away abruptly. Aside from the few minutes at the Yule Ball when Dumbledore had chatted with Harry about chamber pots, of all things, Percy has not been within speaking distance of Dumbledore for months. Percy has nothing to report, given that he had not reported anything in the prior timeline, and he does not know what he wants—or does not want—Dumbledore to know. The easiest path of resistance has been to avoid the Headmaster and hope for the best.

"Professor," he asks while they wait for the judges to deliberate. "Did you ever teach Bertha Jorkins?"

"Of course," McGonagall responds, surprised. "Yes, and she was—well, I worked closely with her. I heard of her disappearance; have you any news?"

She was *what*? He hesitates before asking his next question, but he needs somebody to talk to, and Snape seemingly is not an option. "Well, I found out that a week before she mysteriously went to Albania she went by Crouch's house on the weekend to have him sign some forms."

McGonagall is nothing if not sharp. She glances up to where Crouch is arguing heatedly with Madam Maxime in the judge's box and then back to Percy. "You suspect him?"

"Not—precisely," he equivocates. "I doubt that Mr. Crouch did anything intentionally malicious, but I think her decision to leave the country may be related. Mr. Crouch can be…"

"Unkind," McGonagall completes dryly. "Bertha is a bit forgetful, a bit superfluous, but she is tough, when it comes down to it. I do not think even Mr. Crouch's ire would cause her to flee."

"Do you know of any reason she may go to Albania?"

"She has a second cousin there, I believe, or maybe an aunt," muses McGonagall. "But I don't believe she's ever visited before. I think she must have encountered trouble. Bertha is fairly capable, so I really cannot agree with the perception that she merely missed a train."

Just then, Dumbledore announces the scores, interrupting whatever else McGonagall may have to say about Bertha. Percy conceals his irritation and turns to where Dumbledore is standing with arms outstretched, presiding over the stands.

Harry, despite nearly missing the Task, breaking the rules by rescuing two hostages, and emerging well after the time limit, receives 45 points to thunderous applause. Percy rolls his eyes to himself: *moral fibre*. He does not know why Snape disagrees with him that Dumbledore clearly is responsible for Harry's inclusion in the Tournament. All of these challenges seem tailor-made to convince Harry both of the importance of his *moral fibre* and of his competency in advanced magical challenges. If Harry Potter can take on a dragon at fourteen and win, why would he hesitate to take on a Dark Lord at seventeen?

"Well done, Potter," says Crouch, pausing to speak to Harry on his way out of the stadium. Harry, starry eyed after a kiss from Fleur, has to visibly blink and refocus on Crouch.

"Er, thanks."

"Mr. Weasley, report back to my office after the weekend," Crouch says and then leaves without another word.

"Bit weird, innit," Ron says under his breath to Harry, who shrugs uncomfortably.

Madam Pomfrey begins herding the champions back to the castle. Percy follows behind, falling into line with McGonagall.

"My office, now," Snape says, his voice like thunder, surprising Percy into a violent flinch.

"Now, Severus," chides McGonagall. "What possible reason could you have for speaking to the poor boy in that tone?"

Percy does not particularly appreciate being called a poor boy, especially since McGonagall's voice has a glimmer of humour, but he wisely stays silent.

"He knows what he did," Snape says darkly, and Percy has no choice but to trail silently after his ex-professor and occasional co-conspirator. Snape says nothing until they complete the torturously long walk, but his anger rolls over him in tangible waves.

The door slams. Snape turns on Percy. "*Explain this,"* he hisses. Percy follows Snape's arms, his long fingers pointing to—

Oh.

"It wasn't me," Percy protests immediately. The door to Snape's supply cabinet has been forced open, though the contents appear undamaged.

"*Gillyweed*?" Snape says incredulously. "You mean to tell me that *Harry Potter*, a boy without an ounce of talent in *any* subject, let alone the delicate art of *Potions*, would somehow think to employ the rare and subtle properties of *Gillyweed*?"

"It really wasn't me," Percy insists. "I haven't spoken to Harry in weeks. Best I can remember, he did the same thing last time. Also, I would have told you that I needed Gillyweed, rather than break into your office. Though you might believe otherwise, Snape, I do not lie to you."

"Granger would never dare to break in here," Snape says without acknowledging Percy's words, turning to examine the cupboard door once again. "Weasley's got even fewer brains than Potter, if such a thing is possible. It was probably Potter, the entitled cretin, though I can't believe he thought of Gillyweed. There's no wizard magic here, but perhaps elf—"

"It was probably Dumbledore."

Snape takes the Map out of his robes and examines it closely. "Moody is in his office," he mutters to himself. "If the man has the *audacity* to interfere with my personal possessions—"

"Snape," says Percy cautiously, not liking the ugly look in the other man's eye. "What have you done with the diadem?"

Snape looks up, and the rage in the creased lines of his face is enough to cause Percy to take a cautious step back. "You dare insinuate my outrage is due to the diadem," he hisses. "You dare insinuate I lack the necessary control to protect against its influence? Get out, Weasley. I have more things to do than to entertain what has been among my greatest disappointments,."

Percy steels himself. In a way, Snape's last comment could be taken as a compliment, if Percy ignores everything else about it. "I think Bertha found something in Crouch's home to tip her off about Albania."

"Do you think I care about Bertha Jorkins?" Snape is definitely shouting now; Percy takes another backward step toward the door. "If it hasn't escaped you, Weasley, we are fighting a war! We've barely four months until the Dark Lord returns, you've destroyed the only clue we've got, and we have nothing to go on, yet you *insist* on wasting our precious time on witches and paintings. Prancing around Hogwarts like you were so bloody smart; what was the point of seven years of studying soul magic if you can't even find one Horcrux?

Stung, Percy takes another step back. "Well, what are you doing?"

"Lying to Albus because of *your* asinine plan," Snape says, instantly ready to attack. "Studying the diadem to see if we can even separate the soul for your painting. Trying to figure out which Death Eaters will come when He calls. And Moody tailing me like a dog after a bone!"

This outburst seems to have exhausted Snape; he turns away from Percy, making a show of examining the Map. Percy makes a mental note to complete the painting as soon as possible. He doesn't like what the diadem—or sheer stress—is doing to his professor. Partner.

"Your Crouch is wandering the woods," Snape says into the silence. "He looks as if he's being poisoned, slowly. Note the way his cheeks are sinking into themselves and his brow is always damp. Something is taking his life force."

"Who would want to kill Crouch?"

Snape laughs tiredly. "Take your pick of any Death Eater."

"He's actually looking better this time around. Well, he's acting a bit strange, but last time he skipped most of the Tasks."

"Perhaps this time someone convinced him it was important to go," says Snape thoughtfully. “I believe it not unlikely it is Lucius poisoning Crouch. As in your timeline, Fudge will hardly last another year as Minister. Crouch would be a natural contender for his successor.”

“And if Lucius is worried that the Dark Lord will be upset with him for claiming Imperius, he can always point out that he is on track to become the Minister,” Percy completes thoughtfully. Lucius *is* at the Ministry a surprising amount. Percy remembers the strange private smile that had crossed Lucius’ mouth at the Quidditch World Cup when the other wizard had asked about Crouch. He adds, "Bertha Jorkins visited Crouch's house the week before she disappeared. I thought perhaps he threatened her or scared her into running away, but McGonagall said it was unlikely Bertha would be the type to scare so easily."

Snape's gaze sharpens, and some of the wild anger leaves the lines of his face. "*Did* she." He turns to face Percy again. "Bertha was part of the Order."

"*Really*." That explains McGonagall's slip; of course she knows Bertha, she was one of them.

"I do not think somebody frightened her to fleeing,” Snape agrees. "Crouch would certainly be abreast of the rumours concerning the Death Eaters; I've noticed he makes a point to speak to Karkaroff whenever he is here. He would know that Albania was the last known location of the Dark Lord's shade…”

"You think he knows the Dark Lord is going to return soon?" Percy had never gotten that impression in either timeline.

"You have to understand Crouch, Weasley. He's obsessed with the Dark Lord—more than you, more than I." Snape looks old and tired. "He blames Him for taking away his son, and therefore causing his wife to die of grief. The whole scandal stripped Crouch of any chance at Minister, though previously he was well on track to ascend to that position."

"So you agree Bertha may have seen something in his house related to Albania.” This makes more sense than his half-formed theory that Crouch had somehow frightened Bertha into a rather unfortunate vacation, or the more implausible idea that Crouch had forced her to go.

Snape nods. "Why have a Tournament this year—and invite Durmstrang?"

"He told me it was Karkaroff's idea."

Snape looks faintly surprised. "Perhaps," he allows. "Perhaps it was even Bagman's idea. But it very much required Crouch's approval, and Crouch is nothing if not opportunistic. Perhaps he even sent Bertha there intentionally to investigate."

Percy frowns. "So you think it was Crouch who put Harry's name in the Goblet."

The ugly look returns to Snape's eyes. "I'm not convinced Potter didn't enter himself."

There doesn't seem to be anything else to say. Percy mumbles that he's working on the painting, Snape nods once, and then Percy walks away.

Myrtle is waiting for him outside Snape's office, her ghostly face alight with a grey pallor. Percy does not admit out loud that he is relieved to see her, but he feels some of the tension in his shoulders unwind.

"I saw Harry," she says triumphantly. "I helped him with the clue *and* in the lake. I know everything about the lake, you know."

Percy raises an eyebrow as he continues walking toward the exit. "Look at you, invaluable to the Champions."

"Don't mock me," Myrtle pouts. "I have nothing else to do, now that you have left and don't include me in your plans."

"I have no plans."

"Well, why don't you tell me everything I've missed? You know it'll make you feel better to say it all out loud."

This is actually true. Percy has driven two sets of roommates mad around exam times, though Alexander would always happily listen to Percy verbally reviewing the material. Percy maintains that's the only way the boy passed all seven years.

They veer right, going to the second floor, and then to the familiar bathroom. Percy conjures a chair and sits, interlocking his fingers.

"Well, there's five; no, six main categories," he begins. "What are the other Horcruxes; where are the other Horcruxes; can we use a painting to animate the diadem; what is happening in Albania; what is happening to Crouch; and what happens in the Third Task to bring back the Dark Lord."

"Seven: where the Third Task drama unfolds," Myrtle adds. "You said once that Harry claimed it was a graveyard."

"Yes, seven." He must be getting tired.

Myrtle hums thoughtfully. "Well, I think you probably can't solve *what* or even *where* the Horcruxes are unless you invent some spell to track them."

"I am trying, but it is proving to be devilishly difficult," Percy sighs. "For the latter, I was thinking I could find the orphanage, as well as the Gaunt's ancestral home."

"He was from London," Myrtle says.

"What?"

"When I was at Hogwarts, there was a Muggle war. Lots of bombing; my family wanted to send me to the country, but since I was coming to Scotland, there was no need."

"Right," says Percy impatiently. "And?"

"Tom knew about the bombings, too. When I was a ghost, I spied on him sometimes—and I heard him ask Dippet once if he could stay at Hogwarts over the holidays."

"So you think he lived in London." That would certainly narrow the scope.

"There was bombing all over England, but London's my best bet," Myrtle says, nodding. "His accent, too. But I really do think you should wait for the painting, Percy."

"Well, that's issue number three. I'm taking lessons, but Myrtle, portrait artists spend their entire lives training." Percy thinks dispiritedly of the portrait of his father, sitting mournfully in Malfoy Manor.

Myrtle shrugs. "You don't have to become a master," she points out. "You only ever need to paint one portrait."

Easier said than done. "Well, in the meantime, I'm just about drowning at work; Crouch is acting very odd, and he's given me most of his responsibility."

He briefly fills in Myrtle on what he and Snape discussed regarding Bertha Jorkins.

She adjusts her glasses. "What did she see?"

"Sorry?"

"You said she saw something in his house. What would she have seen that would cause her to go off to Albania and investigate? Unless Snape is correct, and Crouch sent her there, but that seems out of character for him."

Percy doesn't have a ready answer for this. Perhaps Crouch's notes, or a photograph, or an article or a report. It's a good question, actually. Myrtle, as usual, has gone straight to the heart of the problem.

"Seems to me you need to think about Crouch," Myrtle says, clearly enjoying her role as confidant.

"I'm thinking about breaking into his house. That's the stage of my life I'm in right now, Myrtle. It's utterly depressing."

Myrtle waves aside Percy's existential crisis and says instead, "I suppose it does not really matter where Tom is hiding now, given it would be extraordinarily stupid to show up and tip him off."

"I suppose," Percy agrees unwillingly. He still thinks it is worth investigating where the Dark Lord will return, but Myrtle's right; it isn't as if they can just show up and spy on him.

"So you ought to think about Bertha, and about whether poor Cedric needs to die," finishes Myrtle, as if it were as easy as anything to do either of those things. "You can't do it all, Percy, but you can't do nothing, either."

Percy exhales slowly and then nods. She's right, and he knows it. He has to stay *focused*, otherwise it'll be like the time he tried to brew too many potions, and they all boiled over before he could complete any of them. Percy had not enjoyed Snape's triumph then, and he shudders to think what Snape would say to him now if the same occasion occurred. "I've got to go back to work," he apologises, "But thank you, Myrtle. Keep an eye on Snape, will you? I'm worried about him."

She salutes him cheerfully. "Your mind is always tangled. Can't hurt to untangle it every now and again."

His mind *is* tangled, he muses as he heads back to his apartment. Between timelines—the former so far back in his memory now to feel distant and unreal—and the present, increasingly duplicitous, he sometimes can't keep straight who he is, or what he's doing.

He has to focus on discrete tasks if they're to have any hope at all.

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March 1995

Despite saying otherwise to Myrtle, Percy also begins visiting graveyards. This task is surprisingly more pleasant than visiting orphanages, if only because Percy is nearly always the only one there.

He visits Godric Hollow, the place of the Dark Lord's defeat, and leaves flowers on the graves of James and Lily Potter. Aside from the very strong Muggle repelling charm on the memorial and remains of the house, there's not much here to see, though the small wizarding village is very carefully and prettily maintained. It's the type of village that he privately believes his mother would have enjoyed living, had they enough money to move out of Ottery St. Catchpole.

(It does strike him, looking at the graves, how impossibly *young* poor James and Lily were. Married right out of school, like his own parents, with a baby on the way right after that. Why did they feel so compelled to rush into domesticity? Did they not need to build their careers? James, of course, must have been quite wealthy. Was it the war, pressing down on them?

Percy thinks back to the lonely years of the war, where he flinched at every shadow in the Ministry and resolutely turned his heart off to the atrocities committed in the name of bureaucracy. He can't imagine how anyone *found* love in those times; so he supposes as a corollary, if one already had love, one would hold on tight.

Still. Twenty one years old and at the end of one's life. Percy is older than the parents of the Boy Who Lived, which is a rather odd thought).

The next graveyard he visits is Myrtle's. The flower arrangement he lies on her grave is significantly more ornate, and he snaps a few pictures to keep her happy. Again, he sets a ward, but sees nothing out of the ordinary. He doesn't really expect anything to happen to Myrtle's grave, given as Tom Riddle barely remembered her in the Chamber.

The third graveyard is where Tom's mother, Merope, lays, as far as he can tell. It's a guess, really, and he can't find her specific gravestone, though it is the closest public graveyard to the place of her death, assuming the Gaunt family hadn't taken her body elsewhere. He looks nearby for orphanages, but does not find any he hadn't already visited.

And finally, he goes to a town he's never heard of: Little Hangleton, where Tom Riddle, Sr. died.

This graveyard is much spookier than the rest. It's in the shadow of a large, abandoned manor that looks as if it were from a novel, complete with quiet groaning in the wind, and ominous thorns curling up the great iron gates. Compared to the quiet elegance of Malfoy Manor, its dark, forbidding grounds seem weary and sad.

Percy shivers, holding his cloak closer to himself. Whatever grandeur this town once saw, it clearly passed on years ago. He'd passed a tiny, nasty shack on the path to the graveyard that looked full of disease and long since abandoned.

It isn't hard to find Tom Riddle's grave. What is odd is the sheer number of Riddles that pepper the graveyard. They must have lived here for generations—perhaps in the great manor above.

Percy has failed to find the Gaunt ancestral grounds, but he just may have found the Riddle's.

It makes sense, somehow, that Tom comes from wealth and power on both sides, even if the Gaunts were said to have fallen on hard times. His features are fine and aristocratic, and he holds himself with the carry of a more assured boy.

The graveyard shows no real signs of disturbance. Riddle after Riddle sleeps quietly in the dark, still ground. Percy sets up his alarm ward, and then on second thought, casts several

more. He feels instinctively as though this will be the graveyard Tom picks to return, in the shadow of his father's manor, his rebirth on his father's grave.

DISCORD (3/3)

Chapter Notes

Has the timeline changed, or is Percy just obtuse? Only time will tell...

Would love to hear your thoughts!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCORD (3/3)

1994 — 1995 (Percy is 18 & 31, Harry is 14, and Severus is 34, and Voldemort is trapped in the form of a child)

March 1995

With Myrtle in mind, Percy spends much of Monday afternoon contemplating Crouch's dark head as its bearer strides in and out of the office. Crouch looks the same as Percy remembers: his appearance scrupulously correct, if one ignores the sometimes manic light in his eyes as he shouts over the Floo to the unlucky sod on the other end; his moustache neatly combed and hair carefully parted; and his robes always of fine quality and in dark, sombre colours.

Enchanting the parchment in front of him, Percy begins to compile a list, struggling to marshall his tired, chaotic thoughts into something reasonable.

Scenario 1: Crouch has gone mad.

This had been the official line in the previous timeline. Percy remembers that well, albeit with some residual indignant guilt; Fudge himself had personally questioned Percy when Crouch began to miss several of his major obligations, made several insulting claims that Percy was ignoring Crouch's obvious ill health out of the opportunistic desire to take over more of his role, and then taken over judging at the Third Task without so much of a how-do-you-do. He'd apologised to Percy after, of sorts; after Percy had begun working with Fudge, the Minister had revealed that Crouch had gone mad and attacked two of the Champions sometime before the Third Task.

"Couldn't have seen it coming," Fudge had said gruffly, playing nervously with his own moustache, which Percy had taken as an admission of their shared guilt in the matter.

In this timeline, Percy has been paying much closer attention to Crouch, and while the other man *is* acting erratically, Percy does not think he is mad. Certainly he's been more active in

the Ministry, though Percy has noticed his focus is more on the Tournament than anything else.

If Crouch *is* mad, there's nothing much for Percy to do except for stay quiet and try and contain whatever damage the man may cause.

Scenario 2: Crouch is being poisoned.

Percy privately feels that this may be likely, given that Crouch is showing clear signs of ill health consistent more with poison than with mere sickness. Certainly his face is often damp, and his health seems to ebb and flow more erratically than a consistent illness.

But it lays two questions, of course: who would be poisoning Crouch, and why?

Percy feels like it must be connected to Diggory, or Bagman, or the goblins, or the Tournament. Perhaps to all four. But he cannot think who may have something to gain from *poisoning* Crouch. Certainly the unknown actor was comfortable outright murdering Diggory. Why leave Crouch alive? Why would Crouch not take action, if he can sense himself being poisoned?

Which unfortunately brings Percy to Scenario 3. *Crouch is being Imperiused, or otherwise controlled.*

This would explain some of the unpredictable behaviour, as well as explain why someone would take the risk of attacking Crouch. Perhaps the actor wants information from Crouch about any of the above topics, or they want Crouch to interfere.

Perhaps it is Lucius, or Bagman himself, or Rookwood either poisoning or commanding Crouch. How could Percy tell?

Imperius does leave a trace. Percy had suspected for months that Pius may be cursed in the original timeline, though of course by then he had put his head down and said nothing. Imperius is not the same as true possession; it necessitates some of the person's own soul remains unfettered to act. It is a spell of compulsion, of dominance. The Imperiused person almost always fights back. They have glassy eyes and a subservient attitude. Sometimes Percy would talk to Pius and Pius would stand quietly while the spell stalled on how he should respond to a given command. Their movements are more jerky and less refined. Imperius is also most certainly Dark magic, and if there is one thing that Percy has learned studying Dark magic this time around, it's that magic that is very Dark or very Light leaves traces.

Percy does not *think* Crouch exhibits these symptoms, but someone Imperiusing Crouch makes a lot more sense than just poisoning him. Perhaps Crouch is being intermittentantly cursed, unlike Pius, who had been under a spell for many months. It would make the most sense for the unknown Death Eater to spell Crouch only when needed.

If that *is* the case, then what should Percy do differently?

Without knowing who or why may be cursing Crouch, Percy can't hope to feed the actor false information or divert his plans. In fact, what Percy thinks is the most likely is that that person wants to ensure Harry Potter wins the Tournament, and therefore is delivered to Voldemort. Perhaps Bagman, trying to deliver on a big promise for a big payout. Perhaps someone trying to frame Bagman and anger the goblins, thereby depriving the Ministry of their support in the upcoming war.

If the person does want Harry Potter and Harry Potter alone to win the Tournament, so does Percy.

So perhaps he should do nothing, and merely be watchful, ready to act when he needs.

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That Wednesday, as is tradition, Percy goes to his weekly art lesson at the Malfoys. He's nearly finished with the portrait of Arthur; it needs only the last few touches and then it will be complete. Narcissa greets him at the door in the place of the house elf.

"Let us stroll," she says, offering him her arm. "Mr. Barrington will be a few minutes delayed."

Percy takes it uncomfortably; she corrects his grip without comment; and they set off down the winding path of Malfoy Manor.

"Tell me, Percy," says Narcissa calmly, as if they are discussing the weather. "Do you count yourself loyal to Dumbledore?"

Percy stumbles over his own feet. Narcissa patiently waits for him to right himself and then continues forward, pulling Percy along.

"Er, no," he says, hoping desperately that is the right answer.

Narcissa hums but does not respond with words. They continue to walk, the calm facade in direct contrast to the riotous turmoil in Percy's head.

Narcissa Malfoy, for all the time in this timeline Percy has spent lightly chatting with her, is somewhat of a mystery. He knows she saves Harry at the very end by lying to the Dark Lord, but as far as he knows, she does that to save Draco, and not out of any loyalty to the Light side.

She must know, too, that the Dark Lord's return is imminent. Perhaps Pettigrew is sending out notes; perhaps He has gained enough strength to communicate. Perhaps Malfoy has merely looked at his left arm and come to the same conclusion as Karkaroff and Snape: the time of reckoning is very soon.

So what does she want from him?

“Imagine my surprise when I learned that Nymphadora Tonks had written my son,” she continues lightly. “I imagine you had something to do with that.”

Oh. Perhaps this is nothing more than maternal concern regarding Tonks. “I did,” he admits. “Indirectly. I mentioned to Tonks—Nymphadora that you said Draco spoke highly of me. She thought that it was a bit of a pity she’d never gotten the chance to meet Draco, and she insisted on writing to him despite my protests. I would have mentioned it to you, my Lady, had I thought you were not aware.”

“I see,” Narcissa says. “Do you believe she is loyal to Dumbledore?”

Tonks is at some point recruited into the Order, Percy knows that, but aside from her induction he doesn’t think she is particularly *loyal* to Dumbledore. Not in the same way that his parents are. “I don’t think she has any sort of opinion on Dumbledore,” he says truthfully.

“And you approve of her?”

“Yes,” he says without hesitation. “I like to think Draco and I have much in common; I believe he and Nymphadora would similarly get along well.”

“Even though she is a halfblood?”

“Madam Tonks raised her according to her family traditions,” says Percy, which is partially true and partially a generous exaggeration. Tonks certainly has been *exposed* to the Black traditions, but it would be quite a mistake to say that she follows them unquestioningly. “She is well brought up and very sensible. She can seem a bit…rebellious, but I assure you that she acts with honour and is far from reckless.”

Narcissa makes a small, thoughtful noise and begins to turn them back toward the house. “I believe it would be in Draco’s best interest to allow the correspondence to continue—for now,” she says.

“Madam Malfoy, may I ask why you approve of me, even though my family is…” Percy trails off awkwardly.

She raises a manicured eyebrow. “I have learned that family is not everything,” she says, and though her tone is quiet, Percy senses a depth behind her words. “I believe your family has failed you, but I shall not hold that against you, if you continue to live up to the potential you display."

Percy doesn’t even protest the notion that his family has failed him. If pressed, he may even say that he agrees. “Your regard is very valuable to me,” he says instead and inclines his head slightly.

When they return to the parlour, Mr. Barrington is waiting for them, surveying Percy’s progress. “I believe we shall finish today,” he says, giving Narcissa a short bow. “Come, Mr. Weasley. We have no time to lose.”

Painting Tom on his own will be difficult, particularly as his colouring is very different to Arthur. Percy tries to commit everything to memory as his teacher instructs him in the correct way to apply paint to the canvas, the steps of the process, and the correct ordering of the details. He's decided to put Tom in the Slytherin common room, working off photographs of Tom and his friends in the earlier Hogwarts periodicals. He'll give him a set of bookshelves, which Tom's essence will hopefully fill with his academic knowledge; a globe on a table, which he hopes will trigger Tom's recollection of where the Horcruxes may be; and a Slytherin pennant, to awaken perhaps his heritage to Salazar.

Those details are easier to handle. What makes Percy cringe is the stress of actually working on the *face*, to try and bring light to the portrait's eyes and definition to the shadows. That's the part they're on for Arthur, and it already makes him feel as though he's facing an exam he knows he's going to fail.

They finish the portrait within the hour. Barrington demonstrates the charm to enchant it. Percy breathes in, filling his mind with memories of his father, and casts the spell perfectly. Arthur blinks, looks around him, and then waves enthusiastically. They had given him a table with some metal gears to tinker on, and the portrait busies himself with them immediately. Without the potion or the wand-tipped brushes, that is all this version of Arthur will ever do.

Percy, Narcissa, and Barrington all survey it in silence.

"It's an excellent rendering," says Narcissa. "Very true to life."

Indeed, Mr. Barrington had forced Percy to be as true to life as he possibly could. Even the way his father's left eyebrow tufts has been faithfully rendered.

Percy feels odd, looking at his father's face staring out of the frame, so lifelike. If he had once perhaps thought that painting the man would give him insight into his life, well, Percy now knows better. The lines of his father's face gave him no map with which to navigate their relationship.

Barrington nods, short and stern. Despite his utter inflexibility and strict adherence to the rules—qualities Percy can, in all honesty, respect—Barrington is rather likeable. "Not quite a master's work, but a very solid attempt," he says. "My thanks to you, Lady Malfoy, for bringing this student to my attention."

Narcissa laughs and rests a hand on Percy's shoulder. "My pleasure."

The issue is, of course, what to do now. Percy's apartment is filled to the brim with sketches of Tom's face, but he's not yet had the courage to begin the long and laborious process of *painting* the portrait. And even with the generous rates Barrington has given him, Percy is having a hard time affording these weekly lessons, and Percy doesn't have an easy way to make more money with the Philosopher's Stone.

Barrington, as usual, solves the problem in his neat, efficient way.

"I'll be out of the country until December," he says. "I've been asked to take on the youngest Helavia as a pupil."

Narcissa sniffs. "That'll be Tulip?"

She and Mr. Barrington share a mutual look filled with meaning that Percy is completely excluded from, though his relief tempers some of the burn.

"Percival, I would like it if you continued to drop in on me," says Narcissa. "I have enjoyed our little chats."

"I would be delighted, Madam," Percy says quickly.

He's not entirely sure why Narcissa has taken such an interest in him—he suspects it has something to do with his simultaneous proximity to Andromeda Tonks, Harry Potter, Severus Snape, and even Draco—but he's come to enjoy the air of refinement that even an hour of time with Narcissa instils into his life. He's even begun taking his tea at the Ministry the same way: hand carefully positioned, small pastries politely and discreetly consumed.

Plus, Percy hasn't seen a single luminous hair of Lucius' head, which makes the whole endeavour feel a bit safer.

That night, when he returns home, he covers the painting of Arthur with a sheet and turns to the canvas sitting untouched in his living room.

For a second, the possibilities overwhelm him: Tom's face, rendered as carefully as Percy's father's, but infinitely more animated, more alive. Tom with his sly smirk and his cutting jokes and the wealth of knowledge contained behind his dark blue eyes. Percy can admit he has missed Tom, a little. He does not want to lie to himself. Tom is the only person that Percy has met—aside from Snape, maybe—with a mind so sharp and nimble that even to cross words with him is a pleasure. No, Percy has no trouble imagining young Tom ruling over Hogwarts with honeyed words and the mysterious allure of Dark Magic.

Tom's descent into the *Dark Lord* was a prodigious waste of talent. Looking at the sketch he had completed of Tom, hanging next to the blank canvas for reference, Percy feels sad for him, this boy whose initial crime was to be better than his peers and with an imagination to match. By sixteen he'd committed a murder, but by sixteen it was already far too late for him.

Dumbledore had failed him, Percy thinks to himself, continuing to stand in the middle of his small living room. Dumbledore had failed Tom like he had failed Percy, like he had failed Charlie and Bill, like he will fail Draco Malfoy and Ron and maybe even Harry himself. Dumbledore was entrusted with the wellbeing and success of the bright young minds of the Wizarding World, and he fails them without guilt, and they turn to alternate paths—Egypt, Romania, the Dark Arts—for fulfilment.

Percy sighs and picks up the large brush he will use to glaze the canvas first. He won't fail Tom, at least the eleven year old boy that he can imagine arriving at Hogwarts for the first time, in his heart something like awe and half-buried hope. He won't fail the sixteen year old Tom either, or the version of Tom that he could have been at sixteen, if he had not already hardened that heart to the world.

He cannot allow himself to forget that sixteen year old Tom was already a murderer, Percy tries to remind himself as he spreads the beige glaze across the large canvas. Although, *technically* the basilisk had killed Myrtle. Perhaps it is the sentimentality in Percy, but he cannot help but believe that Tom could have been saved, if someone had travelled back in time to the 1940s and gently led him down a different path.

Who had been the second person that Tom had killed? The first he'd killed with his own hands, his own wand, his own spell? His father, perhaps, or his uncle? The elderly Smith woman?

Why does it matter, if I killed all of them in the end? Tom's voice whispers in his head.

Percy pauses, some of the glaze dripping off his brush and into his rug. He murmurs a spell absently to evaporate the mess. He supposes it does not really matter, of course, but thinking of Tom's family had just reminded him that he is not entirely sure if Morfin Gaunt is still alive.

When he looks into it, the next day at work, casting a shielding charm over the documents he'd surreptitiously copied from the Archives early in the morning, he finds two very interesting facts. One, that Morfin Gaunt died early last year and buried in the unmarked grounds near Azkaban prison, which Percy can't help but feel is a rather inglorious place for a pureblood wizarding heir to end up. Perhaps that does suggest that there *is* no Gaunt manor to find, or whatever manor exists is so carefully protected that even the Ministry could not find it.

The second was that *Albus Dumbledore* had put in an appeal for Morfin Gaunt to be exonerated.

Percy gapes at the note in the file for several seconds before he can overcome his shock and eagerly scan the rest of the file. Dumbledore had visited Morfin Gaunt early last year and apparently uncovered a memory that suggested that the crime for which Morfin was convicted—murdering the Riddle family—was actually performed by another. *Perhaps another family member — unnamed (?)* says the file.

Well, Percy knows perfectly well who that family member may be.

So what does that *mean?*

Dumbledore knows that Tom Riddle killed his father. Why would Dumbledore be investigating Tom's family, and in such a way that he has publicly recorded evidence to the same? Was he trying to warn Voldemort that he was on to him? Why would Dumbledore wait to investigate the Riddle family deaths until now?

Perhaps Dumbledore *does* suspect that there may be Horcruxes, or perhaps he is merely reading the signs that the Dark Lord may be returning and wants to cover his bases as quickly as he can.

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April 1995

April brings a blustery sense of chaos to an already unsettled Percy. At the Ministry, owls are blown off course, wards are triggered by gusts of wind, and in some parts of the country, fires seem to be spontaneously erupting. It seems early for Death Eaters; he can't imagine that they would all have prior knowledge of the Dark Lord's return. To tell the Death Eaters early seems risky. Perhaps it is merely an exhalation of energy across the country, one of those times when the natural order of things is disrupted for no discernible reason, something to later be a funny story or remembrance to share with one's peers.

Percy spends most of the first and second week of April in an absolute deluge of work, temporarily joining forces with his father's department to handle the Obliviation of Muggles spotting owls all across the country.

Percy, in some sort of sick rehearsal for what may have to come, is cold and unfriendly to Arthur, as if embarrassed to be working with him. He makes sure to comment to Liam in his father's hearing that he's pleased to be working for the Department of International Cooperation, instead of *Misuse of Muggle Artefacts*.

(His father's face, more sad than angry, triggers something inside Percy that he only just manages to push away. Liam's face, shocked and uncomfortable, is easier to bear).

In the third week of April, Ron, of all people, writes to him about Crouch. Percy had received Hedwig, perplexed; he can't remember whether he'd received this letter in the first timeline, and for a wild second before he opens the raggedy scroll he thinks perhaps Harry is reaching out to him for help.

But it is only Ron, and the letter is only a few lines.

Dear Percy,

How is everything at the Ministry? Have you been working with Crouch lately? We hear he is doing poorly. Have you noticed anything odd?

Ron

PS, it continues in what Percy would guess is Hermione's handwriting, *How is Winky?*

Percy regards the letter—and Hedwig, facing off with Hermes for access to the water bowl—with some bemusement. Ron *had* written to him, the first time, he vaguely remembers, but he cannot for the life of him recall the particulars of the message.

Who had pointed Ron toward Crouch? Dumbledore? Moody? Snape? No, not Snape. Maybe Moody, meddling on behalf of Dumbledore? It would be easier if Percy knew anything about Moody's movements at Hogwarts, but aside from Snape's complaints that the man is following him around, Percy is rather clueless. But why would Moody say anything about

Crouch to Harry or Ron, and why would they be fishing for information about whether or not he is ill?

Perhaps they think that Snape is poisoning him. From what Percy can remember of the teenaged Trio, they frequently believed Snape was up to something nefarious, and judging from the way that Snape glares angrily at Moody whenever he sees him, he wouldn't blame the Trio for jumping to that conclusion.

Dear Ron,

Crouch does seem ill, or perhaps just under a tremendous amount of pressure. Why do you ask?

Percy

PS: No news on Winky. Perhaps you can ask the elves at Hogwarts; they are more likely to know than I.

The day after, Percy reads a poisonous article by Rita Skeeter about Hermione and winces. Poor girl. He doesn't know what she's done to bother Rita, but whatever it is, Rita is sure to enact her revenge in the most painful way.

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Orphanage scouting is an *excessively* displeasing task. Percy feels a surge of pity for all those dirty Muggle children, eyes wide and faces gaunt. Even the higher class orphanages still consign children to rows of beds and communal meals served out of massive trays and jugs. Percy watches one woman dip a long spoon into a big pot of soup repeatedly and shudders.

Percy has never been particularly interested in Muggles. He doesn't want to kill them, of course, but aside from ensuring the Statute of Secrecy is upheld, he doesn't find himself thinking of them that often. But it does occur to him that there is something a bit sad, maybe pitiable, about these common problems the Muggles face. A few good wizarding tents could solve the overcrowding in these orphanages, even if the users aren't able to cast the wizardspace spell themselves. One or two house elves per institute would substantially increase the overall hygiene of each facility.

He visits five orphanages in one weekend and they are all the same. All keep fairly detailed records, and none show any sign of one Tom Riddle.

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Crouch calls him into his office the following Tuesday. Liam looks up enviously: Crouch's clear and open preference for Percy has destroyed any inkling of camaraderie that may have sprung up between the boys.

"These reports have been excellent," Crouch says without preamble. "I've begun distributing them to the right people."

Percy glows despite himself. "Thank you, sir." Surreptitiously he reaches out with his magic, but Crouch's feels clean; no apparent signs of the Imperius. Percy looks carefully at Crouch's face but his eyes are clear and his face relaxed. Percy relaxes in turn.

"This is the kind of thinking that will get us the power we need," Crouch continues, tapping the parchment forcefully. "Speak their language! Even half-breeds have a price."

Percy blinks at the casual diatribe but doesn't react otherwise. Crouch *is* a pureblood wizard, for all his hatred of the Dark Arts.

"I want you to continue on this series. You've made it nearly all the way through the creatures. Centaurs and goblins next. Focus on what we need to buy their loyalty."

"May I ask why, sir?"

Crouch smiles cryptically as he regards Percy. "You're a practical man," he says finally. "I've been watching you, you know. I don't quite know what your ambitions are—but I can see that you are aiming for something."

"Yes, sir," Percy says, hoping there will be no further discussion of said ambitions.

"You're not slow, either. You see what's coming, same as me." Percy tries to convey agreement without actually saying anything out loud. Crouch nods, as if Percy's silence confirmed what he was thinking. "War's coming, boy. And we're going to win it before it begins."

"War?" Percy asks, surprised. He doesn't think that *war* is quite obvious, yet—though perhaps he hasn't been giving Crouch enough credit. This would have to be proof that Crouch is not being Imperiused by someone, right? Surely Lucius or Rookwood or whomever may have incentive to curse Crouch would not want Crouch to know if war was imminent.

"War," Crouch repeats. "Between those who would seek to destroy our society with hatred and prejudice, and those who aim to empower it. I can count on you, Weasley; I can sense it. When the time comes to make a choice, you'll choose right."

"What choice do you think is coming, sir?" Percy asks.

"You'll know it when it comes, mark my words," the older man says, tapping the parchment again. "And it's work like this that will set you up for success. I'm proud of what you've done here, Weasley."

Crouch had been next in line to be Minister, before the public humiliation of his son cast doubt on his suitability for the role. Percy, who very much does not believe the sins of the

father should affect the sins of the son (and, he supposes, vice versa as well), can suddenly see why.

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Snape writes him a letter, consisting of a single line: *They are in the country, I hear.*

After the arduous process of breaking Snape's wards, which predictably necessitated Percy scrambling to whip up a small batch of All-Reveal in his smallest cauldron, the only thing that can fit on his stove, this message is simultaneously over- and underwhelming.

They are in the country.

They.

Whether shade or man or something in between, the Dark Lord—Tom—is back in the country for the first time in fourteen years.

Percy casts a glance at the portrait, which is beginning to take shape, and shudders.

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His wards clang later that evening, echoing with a discordant chord in his head *just* as he had found a comfortable place in his bed to hopefully doze off in. Percy jolts awake, sitting upright in his bed, his wand in his hand before he can process that he'd moved for it.

Inhaling through his nose in an attempt to calm himself, Percy dives into his own mind, navigating to the part of his mental library where he stores information about the wards, represented as a series of locked cabinets. One of them is vibrating softly and steadily. Licking his dry lips, he reaches out with an unsteady hand and presses his palm against the cabinet door.

The ward leaps out at him and envelops him, and Percy has a single, terrible flash of a large, dark house, a manor on the hill enveloped by icy moonlight, and three shadowy figures crouched around a fireplace, before the ward image slides off and deposits itself back in the cabinet, no longer vibrating.

Little Hangleton.

So the Dark Lord has returned to his father's mansion, with Pettigrew and another companion. Why? Percy cannot imagine any scenario where Tom would want to return to the country and take up residence at his *father's house*, except that Percy's earlier intuition must

have been correct: the Dark Lord is planning to use his father's graveyard as the site on which to return.

Despite the late hour, Percy rummages for a quill and parchment, writing out a short letter and encrypting it to the best of his ability with several strong protection spells.

Let Snape brew All-Reveal for two words.

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Not that Percy has copious free time—his free time mostly consists of the late hours of the night, when he cannot sleep—but when Tonks suggests they go investigate some of the disturbances around the country, he agrees.

He does not know why Tonks enjoys spending time with him; she's a few years older, at least by appearances, and she is so irrepressibly friendly that he cannot imagine she has any trouble making friends. Each Auror cohort is traditionally clannish, the one year of intensive training they suffer through together generally traumatic enough to bond even the most reticent of individuals.

But Tonks, for all her friendliness, does not seem to have very many friends in the Ministry. Percy has found her eating lunch alone in Moody's office more than once, and as far as he knows she is still living at home, rather than in a little flat somewhere with other jocular Ministry employees in their twenties.

He has very few friends, nearly no friends, and so when Tonks proposes they spend the weekend following up on a lead she has from the Quidditch World Cup, he agrees readily.

She Apparates them both to a shady park in a small Muggle neighbourhood. After he coughs and clears his throat, to convince himself that he is no longer being squeezed through a very small tube, Percy looks around him with interest. He can tell at once the neighbourhood is Muggle, though Tonks had not mentioned who they were going to see. It is all very still and flat, as if the small sparks of energy he is accustomed to in his daily life have been meticulously scrubbed out.

"Nobody Obliviated Roberts," Tonks tells him as they make their way from the park to Roberts' house. "I think everyone expected your Bertha Jorkins to do it."

"*My* Bertha Jorkins?"

Tonks looks up to grin briefly at him. "Well, after you mentioned she'd disappeared, I decided to do some digging. I found that she had been responsible for the Obliviators at the Cup. Bit funny, actually; if you'd not mentioned her, I doubt anyone would have thought to wonder if poor old Roberts was Obliviated or not. Nobody was Obliviated, in fact, which I will be bringing to the dear Ministry's attention after we talk to Roberts."

“So you mean that all this time, he’s been…” Percy trails off, looking around him, unable to put into words what he is feeling.

Tonks nods grimly. “He’s been here, and I think there’s a high chance he remembers what they did to him, the bastards.”

“He didn’t say anything to anyone?”

“Would you?” Tonks deepens her voice, as if to mimic Roberts. “Hey, Bob, how was your weekend? Some lunatics tortured me with magic. Still recovering, to be honest.”

Percy imagines being a Muggle, encountering magic—having been tortured by magic—and being unable to tell anyone. He has to concede that Tonks is almost certainly correct.

“It’s here,” Tonks says, nodding up ahead at a house that looks very much like the other houses.

“What’s the strategy?” Percy asks as they make their way toward the door.

“Let me do the talking.”

They’re lucky: Roberts himself opens the door, and he doesn’t immediately slam it shut, so Tonks is able to smile prettily at him and say, “Mr. Roberts? My name is Nancy, I’m from the Ministry of Magic.”

Roberts goes pale immediately. Now he tries to slam the door, but Tonks is able to wedge her foot in between, and without looking like she’s exerting very much effort at all, shoulders the door open.

“Mr. Roberts, I’m afraid a grievous harm has been done to you, and you’ve not been able to report it properly,” she continues, now standing in his foyer. Percy lingers awkwardly outside, but he can hear Roberts grunt,

“Go away. I don’t want anything to do with the likes of you.”

“Mr. Roberts,” Tonks says persistently. “I’m a police officer, and I’m trying to find out who did *that* to you. We need your help. We’ll ask you a few questions, and then if you need any medical care, my partner is certified to provide that for you, and then we’ll be on our way. Please, Mr. Roberts. We don’t want *that* to happen to anyone else.”

Percy puzzles over the strange words, but they seem to be convincing to Roberts. After a second, the door swings open fully, and Percy follows Tonks inside.

They sit uncomfortably in the parlour. Roberts does not offer them tea.

Tonks produces a notebook out of nowhere, a small one with strange lines across the flimsy white sheets, topped with a row of metal rings. The device she uses to write on it is considerably stranger; Percy cannot help but eye it out of the corner of his eye, trying to determine how ink is transferred so smoothly to the page.

The sight of the notebook seems, oddly, to calm Roberts, and Percy surmises it's some Muggle thing, like an Auror badge, that would suggest authenticity, or maybe Roberts is just relieved that Tonks can read and write. Percy isn't sure what the average Muggle learns by the time they are adults.

"Mr. Roberts, we are classifying what occurred at the football tournament an act of domestic terrorism," Tonks says gravely, looking at him in the eyes. "My sincerest apologies for the delay in following up with you."

"What happened, exactly?" Roberts asks in a low tone, eyes flicking between Tonks and Percy. He shudders, and then elaborates in an even softer voice, "What...what did they do to me?"

Tonks leans forward and says, "We call it magic, sir."

Roberts barks out an incredulous laugh, but otherwise doesn't object. Perhaps when he'd been revising nightmares of himself and his family, improbably spinning through the air while lights flash below, he'd already considered something like magic. Even Muggles must know magic when they see it.

"It is nothing more than energy," Tonks continues briskly, "Something like electricity. Some people are able to conduct it more easily through them—people like me, and my partner Paul here, and the men who attacked you at the tournament. Others, like yourself, are less sensitive to it."

Electricity? Percy gives Tonks an inquisitive glance, which she neatly ignores.

"As you've experienced yourself, this 'magic'—and I use that term loosely, sir, I know how it sounds—can be used to inflict harm, as you experienced that night. There is a group of domestic terrorists who we believe are using this ability to harass innocent individuals like yourself. We're doing our best to stop them, but we're having trouble tracking them down. Any information you may have from that night, anything at all, would be *exceedingly* helpful."

Roberts looks at Tonks. His brow is perspiring faintly, and he looks fairly clammy, but otherwise he seems remarkably composed. Percy observes him with some surprise. He'd thought Muggles were a wispy lot, but Roberts has a heft to him that belies expectation.

"I dunno if I have anything you lot don't already know," Roberts says finally. "I think they were all men—with their hats and their hoods. Like the ruddy KKK. One of them had silver hair; I could see it shining."

Percy and Tonks exchange a look. Lucius.

"One of them was dark-haired and short," Roberts continues, his voice growing mistier as he delves into his memory.

"Legilimency," says Percy quietly to Tonks.

She furrows her brow at him and he shrugs. He can do it. Maybe not expertly, but competently, and it would be more helpful than *short and dark-haired*.

Tonks clears her throat. “Mr. Roberts, I hate to ask, but my partner here is capable of using...hypnosis to extract a more vivid account of that night. Would you be amenable to us trying?”

Roberts’ gaze swings sharply to Percy. Percy does not really know why they are going through this whole fuss—they’re going to Obliviate the man anyway, so they may as well take what they’ve come for and then leave without any more conversation.

“Hypnosis, eh?” Roberts says in a tone laced with derision.

Percy smiles tightly. “You won’t remember a thing,” he promises.

Unfortunately, Roberts’ memory is muddled. Percy has never entered a Muggle’s mind, but the colours are less sharp, the details more blurry. Perhaps magic aids wizards in keeping their memories sharp, some innate Occlumency talent that enriches recollection. He’ll have to investigate it later.

He falls into Roberts’ mind and feels the man’s panic, his bewilderment, as a man that is undoubtedly Lucius Malfoy points his wand at him. A hint of incredulity, a flash of fear at the wand, and then Roberts’ perspective flips as he’s turned upside-down. Pain, lacing through his head, his body jerking in response. Cruciatus, perhaps? A loud cackle from a man to the left, half-hidden behind the tree. Roberts only seems to notice him because his laugh is so loud and jarring, and Percy tries to focus on the unmasked man, but Lucius twirls his wand and Roberts careens wildly to the side.

The rest of the memory is less informative: Percy watches uncomfortably as Roberts is left on the floor, bruised and frightened, abandoned to make his slow and arduous way home. Muggle transportation leaves quite a lot to be desired, Percy learns, cringing as Roberts hangs on tightly to a metal pole as a train carriage whooshes sickeningly quickly through a dark tunnel, but he fails to learn much else save that Roberts is telling the truth: he knows only of a tall man with blonde hair, and a short man with dark hair and a cruel laugh.

With a sigh, Percy exits his mind, and motions for Tonks to do the *Obliviate*. He tunes her out as she explains to Roberts that she will cause him to forget the trauma, and that he has been very helpful and tries to place the laughing dark-haired man.

He looked a bit young to be one of Lucius’ contemporaries. He’d been unmasked and partially hidden in the trees as well. He looked a bit familiar, if Percy had to guess, but not immediate recognisable. Perhaps the son of one of the Death Eaters, hanging around to get a glimpse, with some distinctive family features, like the Malfoy chin or the Weasley hair, that Percy had recognised from a previous classmate?

What does not make sense to Percy is why Lucius picked the Quidditch World Cup to inexplicably restart his Death Eater activities after fourteen years of silence. Darkening Marks aside, why now?

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June 1995

After that, it's a flurry of preparations. Crouch says he's planning on attending the Third Task, but he graciously allows Percy to come along too. Percy tries several times to detect Dark Magic on Crouch but can find no evidence of it. The Aurors seem to have concluded that Diggory mis-cast a spell, and the furor into the investigation of his death dies out quickly, though Tonks mentions to Percy as an aside that many of the Light families are outraged at the implication that one of their own would be so careless. Snape does not reply to Percy's last letter, so Percy does not send another, choosing to make his own preparations alone.

Percy wards his apartment tightly, hiding all of the sketches of Tom in a locked drawer. The portrait of Arthur leans awkwardly against one wall. He deliberates over what to do with the portrait of Tom, in progress, and then reluctantly decides to hide it in the back of his closet behind his robes and a strong privacy ward linked to his blood.

The week prior, Percy had purchased a series of Potions and enchanted bandages, which he carefully and methodically packs into a travelling case and then shrinks. To change the size of a magical object without impacting its qualities is quite a feat, and a thrum of his old scholarly satisfaction runs through him at the sight of the miniature case.

The day of the Third Task slips into Percy’s mind like smoke twisting above the wick of a candle. He opens his eyes and stares at his ceiling, and his chest feels tight and warm.

Despite thinking through it several times—despite consulting with Snape and Myrtle—Percy cannot think of a safe and reasonable way to involve himself in the third task. Despite his desire to take more decisive action, despite his promise to himself that he will be in the forefront of what is to come—no, for this task he will be naught but a voyeur, left behind.

(It burns, but it also relieves. He has thrice now been relieved of responsibility, allowed to hide in the wings while history unfolds. Perhaps he will always have that freedom).

Myrtle will be stationed invisibly near the judge’s box, able to eavesdrop on the proceedings if necessary. Snape will answer the call if it becomes necessary, though Dumbledore asked him to stay behind. Percy will patrol the maze quietly, in his official capacity, though he will not interfere.

The first surprise of the day comes when Percy arrives early at Hogwarts and sees his mother, of all people, with Bill, waiting in the Entrance Hall.

“Mother?”

Molly turns. Her smile is a shade tighter than it ought to be, but she moves to embrace Percy nevertheless. “Percy, darling. I didn't expect to see you here."

And does that not sting, in the small pocket of air below Percy's breast, that his own mother does not know enough about his job to expect him to attend the final task?

Bill gives him a one-armed hug. "We've come for Harry," he says cheerfully, self-importantly. "His relatives refused to come, though that should be expected." He taps the side of his nose, as if the secret of Harry's abusive relatives is nothing more than a shared joke.

Percy immediately sees Dumbledore in this plot. His mother likes Harry—but never would have thought to volunteer herself as his surrogate family for the final task without prompting. And Bill's presence makes little sense, considering he's met Harry a handful of times. Perhaps Dumbledore is expecting trouble of the sort that would require Bill's expertise in wards. After all, the Cup *is* a binding magical contract, and as loath as Percy is to admit it, Bill is likely a better candidate to unravel its mysteries than Percy. Or perhaps there may be some issue with the goblins, as whatever plot Bagman is involved with comes to a head?

But why feature the Weasleys so prominently? To push Harry into the firm and loving embrace of his family, of course; that goes without saying. But perhaps Dumbledore wants something else, something more. Something clearly had changed Crouch's mind from the first time he'd allowed the Champion's families to visit, and Percy suspects it would take a force like Dumbledore to make that change.

"Hiya, Percival," says a voice behind him.

Even as he smiles distractedly and greets Tonks under the suddenly cooling stare of his mother, Percy's mind roves over the evidence, trying to find the connection.

"I've come to get the truth out of Moody," Tonks reveals conspiratorially as they walk a few steps behind Molly and Bill toward where Harry is sitting, pale, between Ron and Hermione.

"The truth?"

"The truth, Percy, the truth," she says, exasperated. "Where is your mind today?"

Percy sweeps a hand at the pandemonium of the Great Hall. Several families have arrived to watch the final task with their offspring—which makes the Task's poor visibility all the more egregious—and the loud, multilingual chatter is enough to grate on anyone's ears.

"Fair point," Tonks concedes. They arrive at where Harry is being smothered in a hug by Molly, looking both bewildered and pathetically grateful. His eyes are a bit damp, verging on teary, really, and Percy abruptly feels guilty at seeing a plot in every interaction between his family and Harry. The boy is alone, truly alone, and it isn't as if his mother doesn't have the attention to spare.

"Can it be, the Boy Who Lived?" Tonks gasps dramatically, laying a hand over her forehead. "Oh, Percival, hold me up."

Percy snorts, both at the instantly resigned look on Harry's face and the varying range of bewilderment on everyone else's. At least Harry no longer seems liable to dissolve into tears, which may have been Tonks' intention, now that he thinks about it.

"*Percival*?" Ron repeats in a tone of abject derision.

Percy rolls his eyes. "Harry, meet Nymphadora Tonks."

"Erm—nice to meet you."

Tonks winks at him. "Don't worry, I'm not that impressed by you," she says cheerfully. "I expect you've gotten quite enough attention this year without me adding to it. And call me Tonks."

"Is she your *girlfriend*?" Ron continues, staring at Tonks with something like awe.

Percy feels his neck grow warm, especially when Molly begins eyeing Tonks with an even icier glare. "No, Ron, we're just friends, and that isn't very polite."

He and Tonks leave soon after. By mutual agreement, they walk down to the Pitch—or what's left of it, anyway. The tall glossy hedges are dark and menacing even in the light of the morning; a small crowd of workers, with Hagrid towering overhead, haul crate after crate into the maze. Each individual creature had to be specifically granted a permit, and since secrecy was paramount, Crouch had asked Percy to take the lead. The bloody Sphinx was the worst, since she possessed the most independence of all the beings and therefore could negotiate a contract, unlike the giant spiders, which Hagrid merely rounded up and placed in the maze at convenient spots.

"What in Merlin's name is *that*," says Tonks, laughing, as a giant crab-like creature hisses fire at its handler, causing the woman to drop it with a loud curse.

Percy narrows his eyes. "*Not* on the official forms," he says stiffly, beginning to march down to the maze.

Tonks slips her hand in his and tugs him away. "Let them be, they're already here," she says chidingly, still smiling. "I want to scout the area. I know Moody; he's bound to have set up some wards."

"Why don't you just *talk* to him?" Percy asks as they begin to stroll along the maze. Luckily Tonk drops his hand, which removes him of the awkward dilemma of how to extricate his from hers. In all honesty, he's glad for Tonks' presence. The maze is off putting even to him, and it gives him an excuse to look for any disturbances. The trophy is a Portkey, he knows that much; unfortunately, it is locked inside the Headmaster's office and enchanted to appear in the centre of the maze precisely when the first Champion enters.

For all of Percy's suspicion of Dumbledore, he can't imagine him actually sending Harry, untrained and alone, to face the Dark Lord—not to mention run the risk of any other Champions finding the trophy first. Percy believes Dumbledore entered Harry into the Tournament to capture Tom's interest and bring him back to Britain. The plot to resurrect the Dark Lord must have originated with Tom or Pettigrew, or whoever may be Imperiusing Crouch.

Percy swallows against a sudden lump of nerves. In some way or another, he's been working towards this night for years, but now that it has arrived, he is all too cognizant of the fact that barely anything has changed. He and Snape decided not to add any protections to Harry, save for a strong tracking charm Snape cast on Harry's trainers. They can do *nothing* to arouse the suspicions of Tom, for nothing would be worse than his deciding to check on each Horcrux and potentially risk creating more.

Harry will be fine. Cedric, well…Percy is resolutely *not* thinking about Cedric. Perhaps he'll get held up in the maze and he'll be saved by his own ignorance. That can't be Percy's fault, then. Surely if the Dark Lord really *needed* an innocent at such a crucial moment, he'd just off one of the Death Eaters, right?

"Percy?" Percy blinks and refocuses on Tonks, whose wand dangles loosely from her hands. She peers closely at him. "Everything fine?"

"Yes," he says, his throat dry. He clears it noisily and takes in his surroundings. "Sorry; this is a big day."

Tonks nods sympathetically. "Well, look what I've found. It's a monitoring charm, and it's *definitely* Moody's magical signature."

"Can you recognize Moody's magical signature?" Percy looks at the shimmery square of the maze that Tonks' detection spell revealed.

Tonks snorts. "Memorised it during my first week. What, like you don't know Crouch's? Don't lie to me; you spend *way* too many late nights in his office to not pick it up."

He does know Crouch's, actually, though due to his investigation of the man and not due to proximity to his presence. Detecting and recognizing magical signatures is not as easy as Tonks makes it sound; he has a fairly good idea of his siblings', but again, he has cause to pay closer attention than most.

Percy casts the same detection spell as Tonks and is surprised to see several such monitoring spells cast upon this portion of the maze. He leans in and peers into the square and sees why: the magical mirror points to a junction of the maze, and, more importantly, to the Sphinx, sprawled languorously on a small raised platform.

Percy snorts again. That platform had been part of her bloody terms. Imagine, a Sphinx, dictating terms.

"This one is Crouch's," he says, pulling back, his fingers tracing over one neatly erected square.

Crouch's magic tastes to Percy like very old wine. Not fine wine, but rather the type of wine one might make at home and then leave in the cellar, as though hopeful that age will mask its inferior quality. His magic fills the back of Percy's mouth with the heady flavour of fruit slowly fermenting. It always makes Percy feel somewhat nauseated, or maybe dizzy, his tongue searching in his mouth for the source of the taste.

Tonks waves that aside. She remains convinced that this entire year of Moody at Hogwarts somehow ties into a challenge that she is failing.

"Let's keep going," she says, eyes alight with the hunt. "*Obviously* Moody cast monitoring spells. That's an amateur deduction."

Despite their careful investigation of the maze perimeter, they find nothing more save for several monitoring charms and another decidedly illegal fire crab. The rest of the handlers have seemingly refused to help Hagrid with them, and so he alone drags each one into their allotted position in the maze, sweat dripping down his bushy beard. One of the crabs nearly takes off Hagrid's hand. Percy and Tonks both wince in unison as Hagrid roars in pain. Percy does not envy the Champions.

"I really don't know what you expect to find," says Percy as Tonks drags him inside the castle. "Moody was hired to look after Hogwarts for the year. What's the big suspense?"

"He transferred me to *Scrimgeour*," Tonks says disgustedly, navigating quickly the turns to Moody's office. Percy wonders whether the layout of Hogwarts ever leaves the minds of those who spend seven years in this castle. He certainly could walk through the halls blindfolded by this point, even when accounting for the moving staircases. "*Scrimgeour*, Percy. I think he wasn't expecting to have this position; Moody would never abandon me like that unless it was urgent."

"So you think this investigation will—what, prove that Dumbledore asked Moody last minute? Also, Scrimgeour may not be a bad person to know, Tonks. I hear he's rising through the ranks very quickly."

Tonks comes to an abrupt halt outside Moody's office. "I want to know what is happening that is so urgent," she says, and her voice is low and serious. Percy can suddenly see the woman she grows into—at least, until she dies.

And suddenly Percy's mouth is dry, and he nods silently. Suddenly he is thinking of Cedric, and Amos, and even Fred.

What is he *thinking*, letting a seventeen year old boy go blindly into his death?

We have to focus on what really matters, he tells himself against the discordant clang in his chest, and steels himself for what must be done.

"What do you think is happening?" Percy says softly as Tonks, throwing a furtive look over his shoulder, begins to dismantle Moody's wards.

"Lots of Dark activity," she says in between spells. "I mean, you heard Roberts. Malfoy is definitely in it up til his nose. Someone seems to be rallying the old crowd, spreading rumours that He Who Must Not Be Named is back, and who other than Malfoy?"

"And you think Moody believes these rumours."

Tonks pauses long enough to give Percy a skeptical glare. "No, but the threat is credible, at least to some of us."

Yes, the threat is not very credible to many others, Percy's past self included.

“I just don’t understand why Malfoy would choose now to bring back the old crowd, as you say,” Percy says, shaking his head as if he were absolutely clueless. “It seems so...random.”

"What’s likely is that Malfoy wants something, maybe a vote? I think he’s angling for something, and he thinks this is the best way to drum up support," Tonks continues, palming a small knife out of her pocket and sliding it along the door frame. She does something Percy barely catches, and the door pops open. "Moody never thinks to protect against the Muggle angle."

They lower their voices as they step inside the office. Percy has never actually been inside, and he surveys it with interest. The desk has a clutter of magical objects—a Foe Glass, a curved knife, a telescope. Spiders clatter against jars. There are several trunks stacked in the corner, and three Ministry-style file cabinets, dented and gleaming and undeniably charmed to Merlin's tree.

Percy takes a step forward, looking at the Foe Glass. It's all nonsense, of course; just a light Legilimency spell, and the fog for effect. But the fog is clearing, and he feels no prickle in his mind, and a pair of blue eyes rimmed with long, dark eyelashes wink at him mockingly, and he swallows roughly against a dry throat.

"Percy," Tonks exclaims, pulling him away. She knocks the Foe Glass over, and he blinks, resurfacing into himself. "Don't be an idiot, will you? Everything in here will be cursed."

"Right," Percy says, shaking his head. He's having such trouble concentrating today, as if his mind is already in that graveyard, with Harry and Cedric and Tom.

They try without success to break into the cabinets. Well, Percy tries. Tonks gives it up as a lost cause and chooses instead to go through the trunks. Something about the way they are leaning casually against the wall makes them feel that the file cabinets are a decoy.

In the end, Tonks outwits Moody once again, using a hairpin and her slender silver knife to jimmy open the trunks. Percy makes a mental note to learn whatever Muggle magic Tonks knows, but in the meantime they crowd around eagerly.

There are maps: loads of maps, of Hogwarts, of England, of Scotland and Ireland and Wales, even of Germany and France and Portugal. Cryptic markings litter the maps, but neither Percy nor Tonks can make any sense of them.

There are notes, too. Equally cryptic as the markings; names and dates and places. Some Percy recognizes: one torn parchment lists several old Death Eaters. Others are incomprehensible.

Tonks is more trained than Percy, both in Auror deduction and in familiarity with Moody's thought process. She shuffles through some papers and then stops, taken aback.

"My parents are on this," she says softly. "Yours too."

"In another year or two, I reckon your names may be as well," says a gruff voice from the doorway, and both Tonks and Percy whirl, wands out, to see Moody himself surveying them with a raised eyebrow. His eye whizzes around, as if to assess the damage Tonks and Percy did to his things, and then settles intently on his protege. "Scrimgeour not keeping you on a tight enough leash, is he, Trainee?"

Tonks flushes but maintains her grip on her wand. "I want to be involved," she says, gesturing with a tilt of her head to the shealths of parchment littered over the floor.

"You didn't even bother to set up a detection charm," Moody says instead. Tonks visibly wilts beside Percy. "If I were a Death Eater you'd be dead by now, missy."

Percy has never met Moody and so watches this interaction intently. Tonks, so brash and bold, looks more like a schoolgirl than Percy has ever seen her.

"What should you have done?"

Tonks begins to list off some safety precautions with no small amount of shame. Percy files them away idly in his head, watching how Moody's eye continues to look lazily around.

"And you, boy? Hear you're Snape's little lapdog," Moody says with a grunt.

Percy bristles. "Excuse me?"

"Turned down his apprenticeship, did you? Minerva's too. What's a boy like you doing working for Barty Crouch?"

That Moody knows exactly who Percy is; that he knows of his apprenticeship offer, though incorrectly informed about Snape; that he's apparently been keeping track of Percy, though Percy has not been keeping track of him—it's unsettling.

"I'm helping Mr. Crouch run the Tournament," Percy says sternly. "It's a very prestigious position."

Moody smiles darkly at some private joke. "And how do you like working for Crouch, eh, son?"

Percy tries to smile blandly. "Mr. Crouch is an excellent superior."

"Tell Snape that I have my eye on him," Moody says abruptly. "Tell him that he's fooling nobody, least of all me."

Percy doesn't know what to say, so he says nothing. Tonks gives him a small, worried look, but remains quiet as well.

"Now off with you, and don't let me see you here again."

So Moody is in the Order, of course, Percy muses as he reluctantly leaves Tonks behind with Moody. Percy knew that already. But what surprises him is that it suddenly becomes clear why Moody is at Hogwarts: he must be recruiting for Dumbledore.

Doubtless there's a list of Ministry employees to be considered; Tonks undoubtedly will be recruited, he realises with some discomfort. But Moody hardly could be the only plant in the Ministry; there's Arthur, for one, and Bode and Bertha Jorkins. Why not bring Moody to Hogwarts to teach Defence, assess the students and see who may be a good recruit?

Percy thinks of Draco Malfoy, and his mother asking Percy if he is loyal to Dumbledore.

McGonagall is certainly in the Order; she can handle recruits. Perhaps Moody is there to investigate enemies.

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The rest of the day passes quickly; too quickly. Percy steps aside from the clamour of his family to check in with Snape, whose face is drawn and harrowed.

“He is gaining strength,” says Snape after closing and locking the door. He settles into his chair and sighs, massaging the bridge of his nose with his long, slender fingers. "He is readying for something today. By the evening, if I had to guess."

Percy frowns. “How do you know?”

Snape pauses, his index finger and thumb still grasping the top of his hooked nose. “What?”

“How do you know?” Percy repeats. “That He is gaining strength today. That he'll make a stand in the evening."

“The Mark,” says Snape, as if it should be obvious. He rolls his eyes at Percy’s continued confusion and uses his fingers to roughly shove up the sleeves of his robe. Percy has never actually seen Snape’s Dark Mark, or really any Dark Mark so closely, and he stares at it in fascination.

It is *ugly*. That is Percy’s first thought. It is essentially the same design as the *Morsmordre* spell: a skull with an ugly snake twisting out of it. Interestingly, the tattoo is fairly static, though Wizarding tattoos are capable of movement similar to a portrait. The snake curls and hisses, but the skull is still. And as Snape said, it is darkening, actively, the colour flooding into the tattoo’s outline like blood rushing to a bruise.

It seems unlikely that Tom would design such a mark. Percy takes in the crude imagery, the almost phallic image of the snake slithering out of the skull’s mouth, the odd juxtaposition of *Death Eater* —already a questionable name; in his opinion, the *Knights of Walpurgis* was a far better title—with the image of the skull eating the snake.

He feels, oddly, disappointed in Tom. Sometimes Percy used to enjoy the reminders that Tom was sixteen, nearly half Percy's age, but this particular reminder that Tom was just a teenager when he designed this particular brand bothers Percy for its lack of refinement and foresight.

"It darkens," Snape says, when Percy still says nothing. "It has been darkening all year. You heard me say as much when you spied on my conversation with Karkaroff."

"So all the Death Eaters will know today that the Dark Lord is returning," Percy says, adding *Dark Marks* to his long list of research topics. When Snape had said it was darkening, Percy had thought it would be like a plant growing outside; impossible to catch in the act, but over time, presenting a clear pattern. But the Dark Mark seems to be darkening in real time as the Dark Lord comes back to life. So perhaps the Dark Mark is like the Map; it shows the strength of the Dark Lord's soul.

"We have known that something was imminent," corrects Snape. "Though I would not put it past some of His more...astute followers to guess at the likelihood of His return, particularly today."

Percy wonders how else Lucius has been preparing for the Dark Lord's return, and whether Narcissa is aware of those preparations.

"Does it hurt? Can you feel him on the other end?"

Snape's lips tighten at the questions, but to Percy's surprise he answers. "It is a persistent, throbbing pain; it sometimes peaks, perhaps when He performs some kind of magic."

"Fascinating," Percy breathes. He longs to examine the Mark further, but he is cognizant that now is not the time to bother Snape with questions. Instead, Percy clears his throat and raises his head to meet Snape's eyes. "We are ready for tonight?"

"We will never be ready for tonight," says Snape with some frustration, "But I have secured the diadem, collected our notes and informed the ghost to show them to Albus upon our deaths, and performed the tracking spell on Potter. All we can do now is wait."

Percy nods. He holds Snape's gaze for a second longer and then turns to go. Just as quickly, he turns back. "Professor—Severus. Do you think we'll be successful?"

Snape does him the dignity of responding honestly. "I cannot say. But we have no choice but to try."

"Well, if we do die tonight, then I thank you for being my partner in this," says Percy. He smiles weakly, trying to convey his attempt at levity had been in good faith, however pathetic the delivery may be. "It has been—a relief to share this burden with you, and an honour to work with you so closely."

Snape does not respond, though Percy had not expected him to. Percy had grown up writing thank you notes to his professors and toadying to his superiors; it was not difficult for him to master the prerequisite embarrassment to such statements. He has no illusions about whether Snape would deign to respond in kind. Nor does he imagine that Snape has found it anything

close to pleasant to work with Percy, who knows so many of his intimate secrets, and has seen several embarrassing episodes.

Regardless, Percy *could* die tonight, or any day over the next year. He does not want to die without thanking the only person alive who knows his secret.

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When the Task begins, he sees a shimmer near the stands as Myrtle takes up her allotted position near Dumbledore and the other judges. Snape stands around the entrance of the maze, conversing in low tones with McGonagall. A long line of redheads make their way to the top of the stands. A flash of silver catches his eye from the Slytherin stands: Draco, sitting next to Narcissa, but without Lucius. In fact, as Percy eyes the Slytherin section more carefully, he notices many of his old classmates sitting with their mothers, but not their fathers.

Priscilla Diggory envelops Cedric in a hug, and Molly Weasley does the same to Harry, before the two women walk together into the stands. A lovely French woman kisses Fleur on the cheek and drags her teary husband away. Krum does not have any family to wish him luck; Karkaroff speaks to him in quiet, gruff tones before giving him what is clearly meant to be a reassuring punch to his upper arm.

As the Champions take their allotted places near the maze entrance, Percy locks glances with Tonks, who will be patrolling on the opposite side of the maze. She widens her gaze at him and then winks, her hair turning Gryffindor red, as if to cheer on Harry from afar. He smiles weakly back, grips his wand, and then watches Harry, so small in his Quidditch robes, his glasses jammed untidily on his face.

Merlin with you, Percy wishes him. Without thinking, he makes an ancient gesture that Auntie Muriel had taught him, a fist over his heart, wand clasped tightly in his hand. *Let the Light walk with you, Harry Potter.*

Then he drops his hand, hoping nobody had seen him, his cheeks burning. He turns away from Harry and Cedric and the rest, steeling himself, and when the cannonball goes off, Percy does not even flinch.

The maze is large, and as he walks away from the cheering stands and the loud, jovial brass of the band, he finds the sound slowly slip away, sucked into nothingness by the tall, alien, verdant hedges. The sun seems to fall slowly, and then all at once, and before he can realise that any time has passed, he feels cold.

Too cold. Dementor cold. Percy shivers and tries to call for his Patronus, but it produces only mist, as usual. Swallowing, he steps closer to the leafy barrier and murmurs a televisor charm.

Fleur faces off against a hovering Dementor, her face pale and her knuckles white around her wand. The Dementor flickers through several forms in quick succession and then collapses onto the ground, a small girl covered in a slowly congealing pool of her own blood.

Percy blanches as Fleur lets out a little shriek. Then she seems to steel herself, straightening her back. She bites out a curse that Percy is not familiar with, and the little girl fades quickly into the ground.

Percy lets out a sigh as some of the warmth returns to the region. Had Fleur killed the Dementor with a curse? He hadn't known that there was anything to wield against a Dementor except for the Patronus. He is about to cancel the televisor spell when he sees her whip her head behind her. At an invisible sight she stiffens, her wand arm falling stiffly to her side, as her eyes widen with fear. Percy instinctively glances over his shoulder but he sees nothing but the dark row of green leaves. For a second he hears something in the soft whisper of the hedges, some mysterious gasp…

But then Crouch is behind him, striding confidently out of the mist, and Percy feels marginally better and a bit ashamed of his own jumpiness. "Move along, Weasley," he says gruffly, peering into the televisor square that Percy had created. "Ah, the French girl. How is she doing?"

"She just defeated a Dementor somehow, but I think something just cursed her," Percy says, trying to look around Crouch back into the maze.

"Looks like a redcap," says Crouch, his thin frame filling the entire window. "Oh, that'll hurt tomorrow. Well, hopefully the French Defence Against the Dark Arts curriculum includes creatures, hmm? Now keep going, Moody's only a few paces behind, and you've left the entire front quadrant unpatrolled."

With no choice but to obey, Percy casts one more glance toward the maze and then walks on. Three seconds later he hears Crouch inhale sharply and then release a shower of red sparks. The sparks throw eerie droplets of blood-like shadows on the ground, but when Percy pauses, feeling rather like he ought to help, Crouch waves him forward.

He turns a corner and Crouch and Moody and all the rest seem to disappear again behind him, and he once again is alone in the mist.

He walks on for several minutes before he cannot resist the urge to peek again. The section of the hedge he chose is empty, and he wars with himself for a few seconds before he rattles off four quick *Point Me* spells. Fleur is still behind him, though of course the spell is not precise enough for his position to tell if she literally has not moved. Krum is to his left, up ahead, and both Cedric and Harry seem to be toward the centre of the maze.

Some instinct drives Percy toward Krum, and he follows his gently vibrating wand nearly the entire length of the maze before his wand turns inward, suggesting Krum may be close. He has to peer through the televisor spell only for minutes before he sees Krum's lumbering frame.

Krum is Imperiused, Percy recognises instantly, with all his study of the spell. His instincts warn him that something is wrong before his brain recognises the specific threat, and he finds his wand in his hand and a shield twisting out of it before he can blink. Krum's eyes are glassy and his movements jerky, and when Percy extends out his magic, the seeking tendrils of his magic bump quickly against the oily film of someone's Dark curse.

Percy hadn't sensed that earlier, walking by the Champions, which suggests to him that Krum has been recently cursed, which means that the person who cursed Krum—and perhaps Crouch—is nearby.

But it could be anyone. Percy is hardly the only one patrolling the outside of the maze, and someone could have pointed their wand at Krum and whispered a spell as the boy waited outside for his turn to enter.

Percy freezes as Krum cocks his head and turns to look directly at Percy's televisor spell, as if sensing Percy's presence on the other side of it. He stands impossibly still as Krum blinks, visibly fighting around the curse, and then subsides in subservience to whoever had cast it.

Percy really needs to cast the Imperius more, at least to be able to understand its effects. Does that mean that the caster is *in* the maze with Krum, just out of sight, or is he able to fight against Krum's will from afar?

Krum turns to his right and begins to walk off, his limbs stiff and unwieldy, as if he were a figure poorly animated by a fifth year in remedial Charms. Percy watches around the edge of his televisor square as long as he can before he has to cancel the spell and move on.

He follows Krum as best as he can from the outside of the maze via a combination of his *Point Me* charm and the televisor spell. But eventually Krum takes a turn inward, and the hedge grows back behind him, impervious even to Percy's more powerful spying spells.

Percy stands outside and resists the urge to cry out in frustration. *Think*. He has to think. Why would someone be cursing Krum?

Whoever is out there interfering in the Tournament must want Harry to win. Percy had decided that ages ago, and he thinks it is still true. The best way to deliver Harry Potter to Voldemort via the Triwizard Cup is to ensure that Harry is the Triwizard Champion, and the meddler must know that it is nearly impossible to create a Portkey leading outside the Hogwarts wards unless given express permission from the Headmaster, as Bagman and Crouch would have been when enchanting the Cup.

That leads to an obvious reason for someone to Imperius Crouch, of course; access to the Cup would not be particularly easy to get. And Percy supposes that the best way to ensure Harry wins despite his significantly younger age and reduced magical abilities would be to curse all of his competition. In truth, the other Tasks did not matter even the slightest, considering that a head start into the maze would not necessarily confer an advantage. The only contest that truly matters is the Third, which also is the most widely attended. Percy had not seen Lucius Malfoy in the crowd, but he easily could be lurking around.

Red sparks in the distance; Percy sees them and picks up speed, navigating as best as he can around the edges of the maze until he is close to the fading remnants of the spell. Moody is there, stowing his wand.

"Krum boy's cursed," he says gruffly when he sees Percy. "I'm afraid he went after Potter and Diggory. Barty's up ahead, looking for them."

"Cursed? What do you mean, cursed?"

"Imperius, I'd reckon," Moody says darkly, casting a suspicious look around him as if a Dark Wizard would jump out from the hedges.

"Why would someone Imperius *Victor Krum?"* Percy has to ask doubtfully.

Moody gives him a sideways look, his little blue eye spinning violently in its socket. "Dark times ahead, boy," he says, and the tension in his voice travels through the air and down Percy's spine. "In times like these, everyone is either a fighter, a sympathiser, an enemy, or a puppet. Who'll you be, I wonder?"

A hero, I hope, Percy thinks to himself. Aloud he says, "I'm not much of a fighter, but I'll fight if that's what it takes."

Moody looks at him appraisingly. "Let's talk, when we're back at the Ministry. Now go on. Leave Krum to me."

With a muttered spell, Moody forces the leafy edges of the maze to part themselves, slashing at each vine to create a rent large enough for him to slip through. A second later he's disappeared, the hedge sealing behind him, and Percy is once again alone.

But a few minutes later he sees Crouch again, somehow in front of him, performing a similar spell to force the maze to let him through. Percy arrives just in time to catch the edge of Crouch's robes as they disappear into the maze. He finds himself following before he can think twice about whether the action is wise.

Inside the maze it is very dark, and very quiet. The whispers and sighs that Percy heard echoing intermittently outside are louder here, as if ghosts are floating through each twisted tendril, or creatures are rustling in between the leaves. He shivers despite himself, and the sight of Crouch up ahead once again clears some of his anxiety. Crouch looks so reassuringly *normal* that he makes it difficult for Percy to continue seeing spirits in the shadows.

"The Krum boy's cursed," says Mr. Crouch in an eerie echo of Moody. "I'm going to check on the other two."

"And Miss Delacour?"

Crouch shakes his head. "The redcap got her. Took her out of the maze an hour ago."

Percy wonders with the part of his brain reserved for such insane questions how poor the quality of education must be at Beauxbatons, if a seventh year student can't defeat a redcap.

Crouch follows a series of invisible instructions through the maze, taking its turns with confidence. Likely as one of its architects he had the requisite knowledge to decipher the cipher of its construction, but to Percy, following close behind, it is impossible even to tell what direction they are facing, let alone what next to do.

But eventually Crouch stops, so suddenly that Percy smacks right into his back. The apology dies in Percy's throat when he looks over Crouch's shoulder and sees the tableau, unexpected and arresting.

Harry and Cedric are both looking at the Goblet, its silver light casting strange shadows on both of their young faces. Crouch must cast an amplification spell, for a second later Percy can hear their voices clearly, as if they were standing next to him, and not several metres away.

"Take it," Harry is insisting. "I don't want it, Cedric. I've just been trying not to die."

"You were here first," Cedric replies. His voice is raw and full of an emotion Percy cannot identify.

Harry hesitates and then says, "But your father, Cedric. I saw he—er, passed away. He'd want you to win."

"My father raised me to do the right thing, and I'd be finished if you hadn't doubled back," Cedric snaps back. In front of Percy, Crouch shifts uncomfortably. Percy is feeling rather awkward himself.

"You've been ahead of me this whole time," Harry insists. Percy can see how he gestures to the maze as if to encompass the entire mess the Tournament has been. "I've barely survived this far. You haven't struggled with any of the challenges. Come on, Cedric." A pause, then with humour, "I get enough attention as it is."

For a second, Percy thinks that Cedric is going to take Harry up on his offer, and panic thuds heavily in Percy's stomach. Harry has to go. Harry *has* to go.

"Together, then?" Cedric suggests, and reaches for the Goblet.

The spell twists out of Percy's wand before he can think through its ramifications, a bolt of red that flies over Crouch's shoulder and lands squarely in Cedric's back. Harry jolts back in surprise, but his hand has already touched the handle of the Goblet, and he's wrenched away before he can take a step toward Cedric's crumpled body.

Then it is very silent.

"Mr. Weasley," says Crouch, his voice as cold as the mist gathering beneath their robes. "What in Merlin's name did you do?"

"I'm sorry," Percy gasps, feeling the heat of his embarrassment burn wetly down his back. "I just—Harry was here first, he should win. There's only one Triwizard Champion."

Crouch continues staring ahead at Cedric's body while Percy entertains a full-fledged panic attack behind the other man's back. Well, if he loses his job, he supposes he can go and join the Order without anything to stop him save his distaste of Dumbledore.

But Percy couldn't do it. He couldn't let Cedric go, not when he sees now how it happened. Harry had all but talked Cedric into his death, led him to Voldemort for no reason at all. The enemy—Karkaroff, or Moody, or whoever it may be skulking around—took out each enemy in turn but had not counted on Harry Potter's bloody need to have *moral fibre* at every opportunity. Even Harry had said it: he wouldn't have made it even halfway through the tasks on his own.

Then Crouch begins to laugh, a creaky, odd sound, as if unused to the gesture. "I misjudged you, Weasley," he says. "You've got your head on straight, even if you have me worried at times. Come. Let's bring the boy back to the front, and neither of us shall say anything, is that understood? Harry Potter is the Triwizard Champion."

Hardly able to believe his luck, Percy nods hastily. His mind turns to Harry, facing the Dark Lord, and any relief he may still be entertaining is replaced by panic. Percy may have stupidly, impulsively saved Cedric—but may have damned Harry and the rest of the Wizarding World beside.

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The hour or so in between Harry disappearing with the Cup and reappearing at the front of the Maze, covered in blood and sweat and tears, shouting about the Dark Lord having returned, is one of the worst seventy eight minutes of Percy's life, in either life. He stands at the front of the crowd, metres away from the blaring band, and watches as the net of tension ensnaring the other judges tightens and flexes its hold. The audience, of course, does not know that Harry has already won the Cup; and Cedric, groggily being treated for his injuries alongside Victor and Fleur, does not seem inclined to tell anyone. Perhaps he believes that Harry was the one who Stunned him, or perhaps he saw Percy somehow, or perhaps he remembers nothing.

But Crouch leaves Percy after they deposit Cedric back at the Healer's tent and climbs the stairs quickly to where Dumbledore sits with the other Headmasters. Percy debates with the idea of trying to join them, but he cannot stomach the thought of hearing them speculate where Harry may be, and he does not want to remind Crouch of his complicity in the proceedings.

He tries to think of Crouch, to plot what he'll say to the other man when he inevitably confronts him outside of the emotionally charged environment of the Third Task, but he can think only of Harry, tiny, stubborn, idiotic Harry, and Tom's sly, icy power. Harry doesn't stand a chance against Tom, against any version of Tom, and Percy was an idiot to let him go to the graveyard unattended, timeline be damned.

But the Dark Lord must return, and this is the only way they know to ensure he does so.

But once he returns, they can finally, *finally* take action.

Nodding distractedly at Tonks, pacing back and forth with Moody, Percy turns his thoughts to Harry, fourteen years old and about to face the Dark Lord—again. Percy doesn't know precisely what occurs in the graveyard, nor does he know how Harry survives, but somehow, that small boy at the breakfast table faces Tom again and again and comes away unscathed.

Percy has at times wished *he* were the child of destiny, marked for greatness at an early age. Sometimes, he churlishly thinks to himself that Harry need not excel at his classes nor make many friends nor secure a good job; he merely has to play out the challenges set for him, answer the intertwined calls from his Headmaster and his sworn enemy, fulfil a prophecy. It feels like all Harry must do to be great is to pass a series of tests, and Percy certainly knows how to pass tests.

This behind the scenes type of action, all waiting and planning and hoping with a tight chest for the dominos to fall as they should, is far less exciting or glamorous or even fulfilling as Percy once thought it may be. Of course he is here for a reason—years have blunted but not removed the forcible impact of Fred dying, laughing at a joke Percy made—but now that he is here, he feels very much invisible and very much blind, and that rankles him even as it frightens him.

(Although, Percy muses, turning his gaze away when he accidentally finds himself watching Cedric, now reunited with Cho, he is perhaps less good at passing tests than he'd thought. Perhaps all he is good for is waiting on the outskirts of the drama, not accepted anywhere, hoping desperately he is not creating more of a mess than he is cleaning. After all, this entire evening has been an unmitigated disaster, and it's largely his own bloody fault.)

And then Harry appears, and he is screaming, and his arm is rift open and scarred with blood, and a shock travels tangibly through the crowd and sparks at Percy's fingers.

Before, Percy had been in the box with the other judges, high above the drama. Now, he is very much close enough to hear Harry immediately begin to shout that it was *Him*, that *He is back*. He is close enough to see the blood ooze from Harry's arm, to feel the oily slick of Dark Magic hovering over Harry like a noxious cloud, to feel in his body the discordant clashing of sounds as the band abruptly falls silent.

It happens very quickly, after that.

The judges appear as if by magic, but not quickly enough to quell Harry's cries from echoing across the suddenly quiet arena. Moody is there to grab Harry as he stumbles, Tonks right behind, conjuring a blanket and wrapping it around Harry's trembling, thin shoulders.

Crouch arrives first, then Dumbledore, then McGonagall and Snape, and the other two Headmasters shortly after. Shouting; lots of shouting, and for a prolonged second Percy cannot breathe in the tangle of sounds. The group begins to walk back to the castle, though Tonks peels off at a barked command from Moody to try and contain the surging crowd behind. Percy tries to follow, stepping quickly around the other Champions before Tonks

erects a ward to keep the rest out, but McGonagall gives him such a terrifying glare that he halts.

And then he shakes his head and continues on. He is Crouch's undersecretary; he will not be left out of what is to come. He has more of a right to this drama than anyone knows.

By the time he reaches Dumbledore's office, a conversation clearly has begun. The gargoyle lets him up after a prolonged stare, and all of the occupants of the office turn and look at him together when he bangs in awkwardly.

He opens his mouth to explain, but Crouch motions him over in a short, aborted gesture, and he shuts his mouth and hurries to his side.

Harry is pale, holding his arm. Blood drips silently to the ground.

"Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore says neutrally. "Harry was just about to tell us what happened."

Harry's eyes dart around all of the adults. They linger on Dumbledore with a complicated expression that Percy cannot name, rest briefly on McGonagall, and then swing to Percy. For some reason, Harry holds his gaze; perhaps because Percy is the only person in the room even close to Harry's age, or perhaps because Harry still thinks of Percy as his best friend's swotty but well-meaning older brother. Percy nods, gently, and Harry takes a deep breath.

(Dumbledore notices; so does Snape, and McGonagall, and Crouch, and Moody. Perhaps the only one who doesn't notice is Harry himself).

"It was a Portkey," he says, his voice hoarse. "The Cup. Cedric and I reached it at the same time; I think someone attacked Cedric, I dunno, we were going to touch it together, and then Cedric just…fell. It took me to a—a graveyard, I think. There was a voice: *subdue the boy*, it said."

Percy shivers involuntarily. He can picture that voice all too well.

"Pettigrew was there; he captured me, tied me to a gravestone. There was a cauldron; some potion bubbling in it, I dunno." Harry looks at Snape and then gives a little shrug of his shoulders. "I couldn't see anything."

"Was there steam?" Snape says as once. "What colour was the brew? What kind of cauldron? Was Pettigrew actively stirring it—and in which direction?"

"I dunno, all right?" Harry exclaims, some of the flush returning to his face. "I was *tied to a gravestone*!"

"Severus," says Albus sternly. "Let Harry finish. There shall be time for more questioning later."

Harry does not look particularly thrilled by the thought of *more questioning*, but he continues his story. "The voice, it said that it needed my blood. Um, something about the bone of the father, the blood of the enemy willingly given." Harry's voice takes on a cadence as he repeats the potion's instructions, and Snape hisses to himself, just once. Percy does not look

his way. How would it feel to know the Dark Lord so well to be able to predict which awful ritual he will use to force himself back to life? “Pettigrew, he took—he took my blood.”

For a second, all eyes swing to Harry’s bleeding arm, which for some reason has yet to be healed.

“Then out of the cauldron rose—well, Voldemort, I guess.”

Crouch gives a start at the name. His skin is pale and clammy, but his eyes are bright and intent.

"Fully formed?" Moody asks eagerly, taking a step forward.

“Yes, but he didn’t look like a man,” Harry says, his vision clearly inward. “He was *something else*. Something not human. His skin was smooth, and his nose was like—a snake.”

Snape doesn’t do anything as amateurish as meet Percy’s gaze, but Percy senses all the same how the other man registers Harry’s words. Despite the memories Percy provided, he has felt that Snape doesn’t fully trust his story. Hopefully now those doubts will be forever extinguished.

“A snake,” mutters Moody, almost approvingly. “It makes sense that is the form He would choose. It's a Dark sign.”

“Yes,” says Crouch acidly in reply. “As one would expect from a Dark Lord, wouldn’t you say?”

In the last timeline, Crouch had been killed before the Dark Lord returned. Percy had never considered how the man would take the news of Tom’s return. Unlike many at the Ministry, Crouch seems perfectly ready, even eager, to accept the fact that his most hated enemy had resurrected himself.

“Then he wanted us to duel,” Harry continues. “He made me—he made me bow.” Something changes in Dumbledore’s expression, but Percy doesn’t know the other man nearly enough to take a guess at what. Percy watches Dumbledore carefully as Harry recounts how he evaded the first few manoeuvres but then had to face Tom. “I decided that if I was going to die, I’d do it like my parents,” Harry says fiercely and then flushes.

“Oh, Harry,” says McGonagall tearfully, speaking up for the first time. "You *are* very much like your parents."

Dumbledore inclines his head, and Percy isn’t sure, but he thinks he sees something like satisfaction glint in his eyes. “Very admirable, my dear boy, especially for one so young,” he says softly. “Not many would have the courage to face their death head on.”

“Well, then our wands—connected, I’d say, and ghosts began to stream out of Voldemort’s wand. Those he’d last killed, I think.”

There's a rustle from all parties at that, but nobody speaks, and after a second, Harry continues.

"My parents...they told me to run...I wrenched my wand away and I sprinted toward the Cup. I summoned it and then I arrived back here.'

"Fought the Dark Lord and won, did you?" Moody says gruffly. "There's many an Auror who can't say that. Well done, boy."

Harry flushes some, this time presumably in pride. McGonagall nods and moves across the room, resting a hand on Harry's shoulder. "You have done Gryffindor proud tonight," she says, and for the most fleeting of seconds Percy feels a shade of his earlier jealousy burn in his stomach before can return to his senses. "I will go to the Hospital Wing and inform Madam Pomphrey what to expect."

Crouch nods too, looking already ten years younger. "Cornelius will be here soon," he says and shares a glance with Dumbledore. "There will be trouble."

"Between you and me, Barty, I think we can keep him cowed," Moody says with a gruff laugh. Percy had never thought of Crouch and Moody being *friends*, per se, but he supposes this is an issue on which they align very neatly. Percy still isn't sure what he has changed to keep Crouch alive this long, but perhaps the Ministry will be more prepared, this time, and Percy will get to play a part in it. Perhaps he won't even need to distance himself from his family, not if Crouch believes the Dark Lord has returned.

"If you would, Alastor and Bartholemew, head him off if he is on his way to this office," Dumbledore says pleasantly but firmly. "Harry needs to rest."

Percy lingers in the hopes he'll be asked to stay, but Dumbledore merely smiles and says, "Mr. Weasley, I trust you remember the way to the Hospital Wing?"

Snape does not need an invitation to stay; he waits impatiently for Harry and Percy to collect themselves and leave, and Percy would bet anything he would explode with questions the minute they were out of the room.

But the door swings behind them, and Percy and Harry are left alone. Percy waits until they are clear of Dumbledore's office before he bursts out, "What was He like?"

Harry looks up, blinking owlishly. "Terrible," he says, and his voice is once again weighty. "Terrible, but great, I think he was once called. His magic…" He trails off, shivering.

"What?" Percy asks impatiently when it is clear Harry will not continue.

Harry shrugs one shoulder. "It was like an electric shock when it touched mine," he says. "And the Cruciatus…"

Percy subsides guiltily at that and they walk for a few more minutes in silence.

"Who told you that?" Percy asks when he cannot bear to keep quiet any longer. "Terrible, but great."

"Ollivander, actually," Harry says absently. He gives a short, bitter laugh. "Did you know that our wands share a core?"

Percy nearly stops in shock but forces himself to keep walking. "*Really*?"

"Something like that, anyway. He said that when I got my wand."

Harry trails off again, but this time because they've nearly reached the Hospital Wing, and it is very clearly packed. Once again his eyes flick to Percy, and while Percy would not say that Harry was one to seek reassurance from anyone, at the same time he feels as though Harry is checking for something that Percy cannot name.

Before Percy can think on it, Harry squares his shoulders and walks inside. Molly rushes to him at once, and Ron, and Hermione, and even Bill. Tonks isn't there; likely with Moody and Crouch, which is perhaps where Percy ought to be too. There's a large black dog, actually, and Percy narrows his eyes at it.

Well, well, Sirius Black, back from hiding. The dog is, if possible, skinnier than when Percy saw it last. How an heir of a Most Ancient and Noble house seems to be completely incapable of feeding himself is beyond Percy. At the very least he should be able to acquire an extra wand and a wizarding tent. Percy doesn't personally have experience with the type of disreputable places that would sell a wizard an unmatched wand, but he knows perfectly well they exist, and imagines a Black would have several of them in mind for exactly this type of situation.

Nobody pays Percy any mind; Madam Pomfrey competes with Molly for control of Harry's health, as if there ought to be a competition between a trained mediwitch and a housewife. A similar struggle appears to be erupting between Ron and Hermione over the privilege to stand at Harry's unoccupied side. Ron wins, and Hermione glares at him balefully.

Percy is just contemplating slipping out when Fudge, irritable and with the dreadful green bowler hat he sports throughout the decline of his career, strides in with purpose.

"Minister," Percy says loudly in an attempt to cut through the clamour.

Fudge looks at him distractedly. "Ah, Weasley. Crouch sent you to monitor the Champion? Very good, very good, you may go now."

Fudge appears entirely blind to the host of other Weasleys in the room, or at least blinded to the possibility that Percy may be in the room for reasons other than his job. Well, that blindness is what cost Fudge his career.

"Minister—" Molly starts. Black, Percy notices, slinks under the bed.

Fudge holds up a hand. "Please, ma'am, if any of what you were going to say contains the words *You Know Who*, I don't want to know," he says, clearly harried. He mutters something to himself which sounds vaguely to Percy as if, *had enough already*. Percy conceals a grin; he must have met Crouch and Moody at the doors. "My job here is not to conduct an investigation but rather to close the Tournament. Potter, your winnings."

He thrusts a bag of Galleons at Harry, who takes it awkwardly. Ron, beside, takes a very deep breath at the sagging bag, and even Molly's eyes track it as Harry places it with a clunk on the bedside.

"But Minister, Harry said that Victor was Imperiused, and Fleur attacked, and Harry badly injured," pipes up Hermione, who—Percy could not help but notice—brushes aside the issue of the gold as if it were the small fly buzzing around the room. "Surely an investigation will be done?"

"Yes, of course, but it shan't happen tonight," snaps Fudge. "Do you know how much there is to do? We've to oversee International Portkeys for all of the parents and students departing—Weasley, on second thought, you'll return with me to the office—and make sure all those infernal creatures get packed away, and take the Goblet back to the Archives, and a host of other things besides. Students have been harmed in the tournament before, and I daresay they shall do so again, but that was the risk they all accepted when they put their names in the Goblet. Potter, I imagine you'll be healed by morning."

"It was Voldemort," insists Harry, his green eyes dark and steady. "We didn't sign up to face off with Voldemort."

Fudge combines a flinch and an eye-roll into a single confused gesture. "I won't hear anymore about *You Know Who* tonight, is that clear?"

Percy clears his throat and steps forward. "If you wish to make an official statement, you may contact the Auror department," he says, catching Harry's eye in an attempt to ignore Ron's look of outrage. Harry looks back mulishly, but Hermione puts her hand on his arm, looking thoughtful. Thank Merlin at least one of the Trio has brains.

Although, perhaps Harry *shouldn't* make a statement; after all, they don't want the Ministry to take the threat *too* seriously, just...a bit more seriously than they had before. Moody is in the Auror department, though. Last time, he hadn't done too much, which is rather surprising, now that Percy thinks on it, but perhaps in this timeline he'll get the Aurors a tad more prepared.

Percy has no choice but to follow Fudge back to the office after he exchanges a few more curt words with Harry. Nobody bids him goodbye; as soon as he leaves, he sees them move to close ranks around Harry again. Loyal, the lot of them, though not to him.

He's an orphan, Percy reminds himself, forcing his thoughts away from his resentment with a lurch. Tom had been an orphan and managed to survive to adulthood without stealing an entire Wizarding family, but then again, Harry was no Tom. *He's an orphan, and he's alone, and he's telling the truth. He needs their support more than I do.*

The Ministry is in a bit of turmoil, which is to be expected, both with the conclusion of the Tournament and Harry's wild claims. Crouch isn't in his office, though Liam is in the adjourning room, and they share a grim look before turning to the mountain of paperwork that needs to be completed to authorise the transportation and authorization of various employees, wizards, and animals.

Percy staggers home sometime the following evening, feeling his head pound with every beat of his heart. He collapses on the couch, his father's painted gaze following him as he presses his fingers to his temples.

Some people had mentioned the Dark Lord, but not many. Liam had started to say something about Harry Potter, taken one look at Percy's face, and then trailed awkwardly into silence. Even Harry's story of the Dark Lord was hardly spoken about. Likely most of the Ministry wasn't yet aware. There had been nothing in this morning's *Prophet,* a conspicuous silence from Rita Skeeter, who definitely is using the time to cook up something nasty.

There's nothing from Snape either. Perhaps he's gone to the Dark Lord. Percy pictures him kneeling at the feet of the Dark Lord reborn and shudders. He wonders what Tom's followers felt about his new appearance. To go from a handsome and charismatic young man to a half-reptilian beast was quite the disappointing evolution.

He cannot help but ask himself if Tom had meant to return in that form, or if the potion that Harry observed had gone wrong. Given that Pettigrew was likely the brewer, the latter seems likely.

The Dark Lord has returned, he thinks to himself as he struggles off the couch and into his bathroom. He wonders what Tom is doing on his first day back.

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To Percy's surprise, Crouch says nothing about Percy's actions at the Third Task. But he begins to look much improved, spending far more of his time at the Ministry, though he continues to disappear mysteriously for long stretches at a time when Percy knows he does not have meetings. His inbox remains overflowing as well, though Percy feels emboldened enough to take care of clearing it after Crouch catches him in the act but does not castigate him for the presumption.

As a result, Percy receives a first-hand glimpse into how the rest of the world is taking the alleged news that Voldemort has returned. France seems to be the most insistent that Harry is telling the truth; perhaps Fleur trusts Harry, or Madam Maxine has heard something through her giant connections. Many of the other department heads that contact Crouch are merely seeking clarification, an explanation of why the Boy Who Lived may be making such claims, and whether or not they ought to be worried.

To these, Percy neutrally relays the chain of events, that Harry won the Tournament but claimed he saw Voldemort resurrect himself. He neither endorses not denies the claims, writing the replies in the form of a formal, stock letter. Let the countries do with that information what they wish; Percy will not be responsible for any calls to battle or unwise laxity.

Moody, on the other hand, calls Percy in as promised. He spends most of the time grilling Percy about Karkaroff and Snape, trying to assess if Percy believes them to be Dark wizards. To this also Percy tries to remain neutral; he merely states that he has not seen any evidence to suggest either are aligned with the Dark Lord, but given they can't be certain what Dark Lord has even returned, Percy does not feel comfortable speculating.

"Keep your eyes open, boy," says Moody at last, the attention of his blue eye disconcerting to Percy. "I trust Auror Tonks, and she speaks highly of you. I expect you to come to us if you learn anything we ought to know."

Despite wracking his brains, Percy cannot really recall what role Alastor Moody took in the first timeline. He dies at some point in the final year of the conflict. Presumably he is in the Order, though he leaves the Ministry soon after Scrimgeour is removed.

But perhaps Percy could work with Moody, if he sticks around. Despite the fact that he really ought to be feeling the opposite, Percy can't help but feel a bubbling of pride and anticipation and, dare he say it, hope every time he thinks about the future.

He is no longer shackled. He saved a life, and it looks like it didn't negatively impact the timeline nor cause him to be fired. Perhaps something he did saved Crouch, too. Between he and Crouch and Tonks and Moody, maybe the Ministry will have a fighting chance now.

In his apartment the portrait of Tom is coming along nicely, his hand moving over the canvas as if guided by a spell. The late spring had shaped up to be gorgeous, and the summer seems to be continuing the trend, as if to mock Percy for his fear of the Darkness undoubtedly curling its way across the country. Percy lingers in the sun on his walk home, choosing to take the furthest possible Apparation point, if only to have a few extra minutes of sun before he returns to his flat. He's struggling with the Charm to enchant windows inside—he blames his landlord, who seems to have put up a ward on the walls to prevent his tenants from magicking themselves a better view—and his desk inside the Ministry is in a crowded inner bullpen, so sometimes these walks home are the only times he can look around him and see nature. After nearly a decade and a half of living at Hogwarts and the Burrow, Percy is finding it surprisingly difficult to adjust to his city life.

Cedric Diggory accosts him on one of these walks in June, when Percy, dropping his guard, stops to linger in a particularly warm patch of sun, admiring the large English oak tree that borders a tiny Muggle dog park. For a second, he's mesmerised by the way the light dances emerald-green through the canopy of leaves, and then his neck prickles and he whirls around with his wand out to find Hogwarts' most recent graduate, looking rather shifty.

"Merlin, Cedric," Percy says, dropping his wand but not stowing it. "You scared me."

Cedric raises his hands apologetically. Cedric and Percy are only a few years apart in age, and while Cedric was always closer to Fred and George on the odd times the Diggory and Weasley families would get together in Ottery St. Catchpole, he and Percy always had a perfectly cordial relationship. "Sorry," Cedric excuses himself with a wan grin. "It's just—I need to talk to you, Percy. In private."

Percy flicks his gaze around, but there are only a few Muggles about, eyeing Percy's wand curiously. Percy flushes and finally flicks his wand back into his holster, which disappears from sight. "What's it about?"

Cedric looks around him too, but more obviously, and with more desperation. "Mr. Crouch," he whispers, the sound like the susurration of the emerald leaves above.

Percy debates for a second the wisdom of taking Cedric to his flat, but he does not particularly like the idea that anyone know where he lives, and so instead he walks with Cedric until they are firmly ensconced in the centre of the park, dogs yapping loudly on either side, and a strong privacy ward erected.

"What about Mr. Crouch?"

Cedric hesitates and then says, leaning in, "He cursed me, Percy. At the Tournament. I *saw* him."

Oh, Merlin. Oh, bloody Merlin. Percy swallows and then replies, in what he hopes is a neutral tone, "What do you mean?"

"I was *there*," insists Cedric. He gazes over Percy's shoulder, and though Percy feels the urge to glance behind him as well, there are only two Muggle women and their large brown dogs. "There was a spider…well, the whole maze was horrid, but there was a spider at the very end, one of Hagrid's giant spiders, and Harry saved me from it. We were going to take the Cup together, you see."

"Together?" Percy asks stupidly, trying to buy himself some time.

"Yes," Cedric says defensively. "We're both from Hogwarts, and it wasn't like the other Champions were anywhere to be found—and my father—well, Harry was the one who suggested it."

"And then you say that Mr. Crouch *cursed* you?"

Cedric twitches at the obvious surprise and skepticism in Percy's question. "I know how it sounds, but yes. I saw him clearly, like those women over there. He Stunned me so that Harry would win. And then Harry went off to *battle You Know Who.* Merlin, Percy. What if Crouch *knew?* I mean, Victor and Fleur, they're no slouches at magic…we all saw Fleur take down that dragon, and Victor at the lake…they could easily have made it first to the Cup. What if Crouch was waiting around, ensuring that Harry was the one to get Portkeyed out?"

Percy supposes, for a wild, frenetic second, that if the plot were so obvious that even *Cedric Diggory* could easily deduce it, whoever was around meddling behind the scenes must not be particularly clever.

Then he tries to focus back on Cedric. Damage control. He can't have Cedric repeating his suspicions about Crouch to all and sundry; Crouch is a victim in this, and Percy is certain he isn't being Imperiused at the moment, and Percy won't have him taken out of a spot where he

could be useful just because Percy had felt a moment of sentimentality in the maze. Equally so, Percy cannot admit to his own error. But where to point Cedric?

“I know it sounds absurd,” Cedric says into the silence. “I mean, my own father worked closely with Crouch, and he thought very highly of him. But someone murdered my dad, and what if it was Crouch?”

Percy opens his mouth without any plan. What comes out of it surprises both of them. “I think there is a Death Eater in the Ministry, working behind the scenes.”

“*What?”*

“Think about it,” Percy continues, mentally swearing at himself, but with no choice other than an Obliviate to continue on this course of action. “It’s not Crouch; I’ve seen him every day for months, there’s not a chance he’d be able to hide the fact that he was a Death Eater from me. But someone had to have access to the Cup, and it was more likely than not a Ministry employee.”

“Polyjuice?” Cedric suggests, his brown eyes wide.

“Perhaps,” Percy says thoughtfully. Certainly Polyjuice would be difficult to detect. Unlike the Imperius, it is not technically Dark Magic, though it is classified as a Dark potion. Polyjuice is nothing more than bottled self-Transfiguration, powered by the transformative substance of a person’s hair or fingernails.

“What should we do?”

“I am investigating, and *quietly,* so don’t go around telling people,” says Percy. “Merlin, Cedric. If someone targeted Mr. Crouch, I’ll be in danger if anyone thinks I know more than I ought. Promise me you shan’t say anything to *anyone*.”

Cedric nods solemnly. “What shall I do?” When Percy pauses, Cedric narrows his eyes. “Percy, I won’t sit by quietly. There’s dark times ahead, we can all see that. I was the Hogwarts Champion; that means something.”

“Go talk to Dumbledore, then,” suggests Percy, ignoring with some practise the flare of jealousy that ignites in his stomach when he hears Cedric lay claim to the title of *Hogwarts Champion*. What would it feel like, to know that you and you alone were chosen to represent the entire school? (Rather like being chosen for Head Boy, Percy supposes, but better). “But Cedric, please don’t mention my name.”

“You don’t trust Dumbledore?” Cedric asks, astutely.

Percy shakes his head. “No, it’s not that. But I work so closely with the Minister, and others…they’ll turn on me if they hear me taking Dumbledore’s side. I’d rather talk to Dumbledore myself, rather than have you do it.”

Cedric nods. Percy has always thought of him as a reasonable sort of chap, and he proves that assumption right again. It probably follows some Hufflepuff rulebook for Cedric to keep

mum on Percy's involvement, given it would be unthinkable for Cedric to assume Percy is not going to forthrightly go to Dumbledore and confess his suspicions at the earliest possible opportunity. Cedric is not a particularly subtle boy, but Percy thinks he could rely on him to keep his word. “Thanks, Percy. I knew I could count on you. We Ottery lads have to stick together, don’t we?”

Percy smiles weakly and watches as Cedric lopes away, stopping to pet one of the dogs on his way out, exchanging a smile with the Muggle women. Then he makes his own way to the Apparation point, though the warmth of the sun no longer is as pleasing.

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Despite the clamour of the Tournament, Harry does not make a statement to the Aurors, whether out of laziness or reluctance or some other cunning. The Auror office does not start any sort of serious investigation into anything, reports Tonks, despite Moody’s rather dramatic re-entrance into their ranks. Perhaps Dumbledore has come to the same conclusion as he and Snape, that it would be better if Tom did not feel too threatened by the Ministry.

Percy makes great strides on the portrait. It is easier this time, somehow, as if something were controlling his hand. He finds he can easily picture Tom’s features in his head, and his brushes move smoothly and adeptly over the canvas as if he were a much more talented painter.

Percy is summoned home to the Burrow two weeks after Ron returns from school. His youngest brother is moody and quiet, but Fred and George are the complete opposite, gleefully locking themselves into their room to create explosions. Even Ginny is uncharacteristically quiet throughout supper. Nobody really notices, since Ron—in the midst of a protracted sulk—seems intent on picking a fight with Percy, daring him to commit to either denouncing or supporting Harry.

“Stop it,” Percy snaps after Ron’s third snarky comment. “I told this to Ginny and I’ll tell it to you: we don’t know what Harry saw, or what it means. Just because a figure emerged from a cauldron and claimed to be *the Dark Lord* doesn’t mean it’s true. And even if it is, we don’t know what magic he used to reincarnate himself. We don’t know what he remembers or what he’s capable of doing.”

“You just don’t want to believe Harry,” Ron snaps right back. “Why would he lie?”

“I don’t think he’s lying, but he may not know what he saw,” Percy says heatedly. “He’s fourteen, and if he’s anything like you, he’s not much of a scholar. It wouldn’t take much to convince him of something that’s not true.”

“Do you mean our Ronald is not a scholar?” Fred inserts, entirely unhelpfully.

“Nor young Harry either?” George is right on his heels. “Why, Ronald, we thought you—”

“—were as much of a swot as dear Perfect Prefect Percy here.”

Percy turns on them in a fury and Arthur speaks up, his voice final. “Enough, boys.” They subside, though Fred and George continue grinning. “Percy’s right, Ron. No, he is. We don’t know what Harry saw, and we don’t know what it means, but Albus believes whatever came back that night poses a threat to us and to Harry. We’re going to be leaving the Burrow.”

“*What?"*

“We’ll be going to a safehouse,” says Arthur, exchanging a look over Percy’s head with Molly. “You’ll know more when we arrive. We leave in one week.”

“Is Harry coming?” Ron immediately asks.

Am I? Percy wonders. He’d not been invited the last time; this had been well after his screaming match with his father. Should he go with them, try and wrangle an invite to the Order? The obvious answer would be yes—but perhaps he ought to stage that screaming match and try to learn more about what Tom is up to. Without the Tournament, Percy won’t have an excuse to go to Hogwarts, and he shan’t be able to talk to Snape so frequently. He’s liable to spend the whole of next year sitting behind his desk, processing paperwork for Crouch.

They’ll probably ask him to join the Order tonight, which will definitely make it complicated to later break from the family. But equally so, if he does cause a scene, will they invite him back in if he later regrets it? That seems more probable; last time Molly had begged him repeatedly to reconsider his hateful words to his father.

“Harry will come, at some point,” Arthur says delicately. Percy wonders when he’d discussed this with Dumbledore. “Albus needs him to spend time with the Dursleys. Something about the wards, I believe.”

The wards? What kind of wards would require Harry to stay with his Muggle relatives for a certain amount of time? They could not be magic based wands, given that the Dursleys are Muggle.

The only thing that Percy can think of that would be nourished by physical presence is a blood ward, which would be decidedly Dark. Hadn’t there been something that Dumbledore had said, a few years ago, about how Lily had protected Harry?

And since Harry, after the war, was so insistent that his mother was the reason that he survived the killing curse means that those blood wards may be based on sacrifice, which is decidedly more powerful.

“He’ll be a stuffed kneazle at the Dursleys!”

Molly breaks in. “He’ll be protected, Ron.”

“But you cannot say anything to him, do you understand?” Arthur looks at Ron steadily, and then at the rest of the family. “None of you can say anything about Harry, about this

safehouse, about anything else you may learn to *anyone*. You may speak to Harry when he arrives, but say *nothing* in a letter, do you understand me?"

After that proclamation, the rest of the meal is exceedingly silent. Percy finishes quickly and then lingers awkwardly, sure his parents will ask to speak to him after the younger brood have disappeared into their respective rooms.

"Percy, a word," his father says.

Percy practices what he's going to say. He's not going to start a *fight*, but if they ask him to move into the safe house, he'll say that he has his own life and he needs to be accessible from his flat for his job.

"Percy, we have something we need to ask you," Arthur says, before clearing his throat and looking at Molly.

His mother looks at Percy with a look that would be more familiar on Ron's face. She purses her lips, swallows heavily, and then says, "Albus would like us to ask you if you would be willing to use the Prewett inheritance for the Order."

Percy blinks at her, taken aback. "What?"

"As you know, since I am not a formal heir of the Prewett family, I cannot use any of the inheritance without Auntie Muriel's approval—and yours, now that she's named you as her heir," she says between clenched teeth.

At one point, Aunt Muriel had suggested Percy and Molly go together to the vault. At one point, she'd claimed she was going to name Molly as her heir as well.

Percy wonders what his mother said to stop Aunt Muriel from enacting that plan.

"And Dumbledore wants me to what—fund this safehouse?"

"Not just the safehouse, Percy," Arthur says. "We spoke to you about the Order last time, I believe. If He is back, Albus will need money for many things."

"And he's not got any other pureblood heirs to ask, I imagine," Percy says acidly. Tonks, perhaps, though her family gave up their claim to the House of Black. "What about Sirius Black?"

His parents exchange a look. "Sirius is already contributing quite a bit."

"It's quite too bad that the Weasleys chose not to focus on money," says Percy, his heart beginning to beat quickly and combatively in his throat. "It would be nice if we had money to give to Dumbledore as soon as he asks, wouldn't it be?"

"Percy—" his mother begins admonishingly.

"No, Mother, you know it's true. You and Father will spend my entire life telling me not to value *wealth*, not to have *ambition*, to be content with our lot in life, and the moment your

precious *Dumbledore* needs a few Galleons to rub together you'll completely change your tune! Do you even know what he's planning to do with the money? What exactly will he fund? Will I receive any sort of receipt? Do I get a say in how it's used?"

"Perhaps it will be better if you arrange a time to speak with him," says Arthur.

Molly stands. "He shouldn't have to speak with Albus! Our word should be enough for him. But if he's *unwilling* to use his new title to help his family, then there's nothing we can do."

"I am not a child, Mother. I can make my own decisions."

"And yet you insist on acting like one," his father says sharply, which for Arthur is nothing short of a biting admonition. He sighs and continues in a milder tone, "Percy, you must be careful. I hear you are meeting regularly with the Malfoys. They are not to be trusted."

"Why do you hate Lucius Malfoy so much?"

Arthur sighs, pressing his fingers into the pads of his eyes on either side of his nose. "You've asked me that before, Perce."

"I deserve to know," Percy insists. "There are plenty of snobbish wealthy pureblood families. I went to school with all of their heirs. Why the Malfoys, specifically?"

"Why must you always push, Percy?" His mother snaps. "Why can you not trust your father and I? You should not associate with the Malfoys; what else is there to it?"

"I deserve to know," Percy repeats emphatically. "I am an *adult.* I cannot rely on either of you any longer; I must make my own way in this world, build my own career, win my own respect. But you both seem insistent that I take your drama and grudges into my adult life, and I'm tired of it."

Molly laughs, and it is both harsh and grating. Percy flinches. He's seen his mother like this before but only infrequently. With Ron and Fred and George and Ginny, Molly is strict but kind, liable to flick her kitchen towel at their legs or order them about but unlikely to take it any further. With Percy—and with Charlie and Bill too—she is sterner and stricter and, at times, much more volatile. "Do you really want to know, Percy?"

"Yes, of course."

"In another world you may have been Lucius Malfoy's child," Molly says viciously. Percy gapes at her, and she smiles bitterly. "Oh, yes. He was rather infatuated with me. Molly Prewett, young and wealthy—oh, I was quite the catch, you see."

Percy cannot help but swing his eyes to Arthur, who next to Lucius is as old and deflated as a bicycle tire left out in the snow.

"My friends thought I was mad," Molly continues. "To throw away my chance to be *Lady Malfoy*, only to be *Mrs. Weasley?* You think you are the first to judge me, Percy, but you are hardly anything close."

“Why *didn’t* you marry him?” Percy bursts out.

“Lucius Malfoy is cruel, Percy,” his mother says, and some of the combative light dims in her eyes. “He is cruel, and he tries to take what he believes he is deserved—with force, if he must.”

Percy shivers. There is an entire world behind that sentence, and he is not entirely sure he wishes to uncover it.

“Your father is a good man. He is kind and strong and believes in all of us, Percy. You are like me: quick to act, quick to judge, and slow to regret.”

Percy tries not to think of himself as being *like* either of his parents, but he cannot bring himself to deny his mother as she stares at him proudly, her eyes glittering.

“I chose this family and I would do it again and again if I had to,” she says with an air of finality. “I pray you make the same choice.”

His mother rises and walks silently out of the room. Arthur follows, not even pausing to give Percy an apologetic look. Percy sits on the couch, struck by the implications of what his mother said.

To think, *Lucius Malfoy* wanting to wed his mother.

But it makes sense, if he thinks on it further. He’s seen photographs of his mother in school, young and bright and laughing and beautiful. To hear McGonagall tell it, his mother had been rather intelligent, taking extra tutelage and taking several difficult OWL classes. And hadn’t Molly told him she’d received an invitation to study duelling in France?

She should have married Lucius. Although, Narcissa Malfoy is lovely too, and undoubtedly quick and intelligent herself. Percy thinks of Narcissa and her porcelain smile in the quiet, gentle east parlour of her mansion and can admit the clamour of the Burrow suits his mother better.

But nevertheless, the story of Lucius did nothing but distract him from the main indignities of the evening. The nerve of his parents to insinuate that he is *betraying* his family, merely because he does not always agree to their demands without question!

The absolute nerve of Dumbledore and his parents! It didn’t escape Percy that he received neither an invitation to the safehouse nor an invitation to join the Order. Dumbledore doesn’t want him; he wants Percy’s money.

Well, he can’t have it.

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As the Weasleys prepare to vacate the Burrow for whatever passes for a safehouse in the under-funded Order–Ron shoving socks into his trunk up until the last minute, Ginny burying all of her old diaries viciously in the backyard, Fred and George stretching the limit of Shrinking Charms, frantically reviewing Gibson's principle of layering charms on magical objects, and Arthur and Molly staring around them, each praying that they may one day return to this old and ramshackle house which holds all of their memories, to the bed where they willed each child into being and the kitchen with the marks of each year's heights embedded into one wall–Percy is resolutely *not* there, spending his afternoons working on the curve of Tom's chin as his face slowly materialises into being.

Chapter End Notes

I think Tom would spend most of his first day back sleeping or finding more luxurious accommodations, but maybe that's just me.

CONFINEMENT (1/4)

Chapter Notes

I am back!! After two years, I succumbed finally to COVID. All good now, but despite all the hours I spent quarantining, I didn't manage to do anything more productive than watch TV. I didn't feel like doing anything productive (i.e. writing) but I really enjoyed reading everyone's comments and they really motivated me to pick this back up after the break, so thank you!

Hope everyone is staying safe out there.

CHAPTER NINE: CONFINEMENT

1995—1996 (Percy is 19 & 32, Severus is 34, Harry is 15, the Dark Lord is, by some accounts, 1)

June 1995

The Dark Lord has returned. Percy shivers to think of it as England rolls out a flurry of misty rain and crashing thunderstorms to introduce a summer crackling with quiet electricity before subsiding into long, languorous days of unrelenting, oppressive heat. After Percy's argument with his parents, he avoids the Burrow, and all of his siblings ignore him, save for Charlie and occasionally Ginny.

The twins are definitely up to something, Ginny writes to him. *They've come into some money or something—probably gambling on Harry in the Tournament. Lots of explosions in their room, and they won't let me join in. Ron is quiet and spends ages sitting in his room, writing something, but Dad's forbidden him from writing to Harry. Dumbledore's orders. So I think he might be writing to Hermione. Should I tell Ron that he likes her, do you think, or let him figure it out on his own?*

Percy snorts, reading Ginny's letter in the echoing silence of his flat over a bracing cup of tea. He's very pleased to not be at home, of course, he *is* —but he misses Ginny sometimes. He has no doubt Ron's infatuation with Hermione Granger is obvious to all of the other Weasleys, but, if he's remembering the particulars of his brother's love life correctly, Ron is destined to blunder through several more years of misfortune.

We're leaving the Burrow, soon. Heading to [redacted]. Just kidding. I don't actually know. I don't think Dad knows either. Guess we'll see when we arrive. After that, no post, so don't do anything stupid now that you are persona non grata as far as the Weasleys are involved. At

least, not where I can't see. (Mum is furious at you, but she'll come around, Percy. You know what she's like.)

At the bottom of the letter, cramped and squeezed under Ginny's flowery signature, she adds:

Perce—is He Tom, do you think?

He sighs, rolling the letter carefully into a scroll and casting a light Preservation Charm on it. Is He indeed. Percy doesn't think so. If the Dark Lord remembered everything he did as Tom, Percy wouldn't doubt that he would have checked on all of the Horcruxes as soon as he could. Not to mention, he'd probably come for Percy, wouldn't he? Not that Percy was *that* meaningful to Tom...but Tom would come for him, wouldn't he, if he remembered?

Dear Ginny,

Be safe, please. No, I'm not lecturing you, but if He is back (and no matter what Harry says, Ginny, think logically. Do not accept anyone's words blindly, even mine. He may be back but He may be a shade, or a corruption, or a reincarnation effort gone wrong, or even a very skilled impersonator. It does not make Him any less dangerous, but it may make Him less straightforward. Assume nothing)—if He is back, then you will be in danger. We will all be in danger as long as the Weasleys are known to shelter Harry Potter, and even if we were to cast him out to the streets now, just on the basis of our past association.

Here he pauses, wordlessly evaporating the ink that falls from his quill before it hits the parchment without thinking of it, an old habit from his Hogwarts days. Nobody is reading his post yet. This may be the last time he has a chance to communicate with Ginny honestly.

Ginny—I think whatever the truth is, there will be dangerous times ahead. You are young but you are not stupid. Learn to protect yourself, please. Question what you hear. Be safe. Don't leave evidence about, don't draw attention to yourself, don't be rash or reckless. Always think of the implications of your actions. This may drag on for years; it isn't a schoolyard battle to be defeated in a blaze of light. These next few years may change all of our lives for good—for better, for worse, or in ways we could never have anticipated. Do not react hastily to things, or with unnecessary emotion, but be calm and think ahead.

Ron can be rash. Harry can be rash. I do not know Hermione very well but I imagine she too can be rash. We all can, really. But I know you, Ginny, and you have a brilliant mind. Use it. And always remember that if we are headed into war, then it is a war we are facing, not merely a battle. There are no points gained for wars half-won, remember.

What I said on the train will always be true.

Percy

(He may not be Tom, but if He is, he'll want you, Ginny. Be cautious. Go nowhere alone. Find people you trust. Learn all the magic you can. Destroy this letter.)

He has a vague idea of writing to Ron, but the thought exhausts him, and so he whistles for Hermes and gives only one letter to be delivered.

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Crouch continues to improve in health by—well, not by leaps and bounds, but at least by steps in the right direction. Percy feels that whoever Imperiused or poisoned Crouch, presumably to get access to the Tournament, likely has bigger problems to contend with now and no more use for the man. Percy would still like to know who was responsible, of course, but he does not think it the most pressing issue that he has to investigate, given it likely was just a Death Eater who is now off gallivanting with the Dark Lord. He continues to watch Crouch carefully, but the brush with Krum in the Tournament has calmed Percy, some, or at least given him more confidence in his abilities to detect the Imperius. Crouch's magic feels perfectly fine whenever Percy extends his own to check, though the sour notes of wine in Crouch's magical signature deepen as the summer goes on, hot and heavy.

In truth, Percy has to think carefully about whether he wants to leave his position as Crouch's primary assistant. The Department of International Magical Cooperation could be very useful in a war and it feels good, in a way, to be doing something meaningful to contribute to the war effort, as nascent as it may be. Each report that Percy compiles feels like a small stone in the wall against the Dark Lord.

But Percy ultimately decides to apply for the position of Junior Assistant to the Ministry when it becomes open. Crouch informs Percy that he's far too valuable of an employee to lose to Fudge without a fight, but he'll deign to share Percy with Fudge on a part-time basis if Percy truly wishes to attach himself to a man unlikely to last the year as Minister.

("Well, you see, Mr. Crouch, it's Junior Assistant to the *Minister*, not to Mr. Fudge," Percy quips innocently, and he's rewarded with perhaps the first laugh he's ever coaxed from Crouch, albeit grudging).

It's a bit of an unorthodox arrangement that may have raised some eyebrows if anyone dared to get too close to Fudge these days. Fudge is truly odious, of course, but close up, Percy is struck by how lost the other man is, how often he lashes out, how reviled he is making himself in the upper echelons of society, many of whom have their own private opinion about whether the Dark Lord has truly returned. But it matters not if Fudge is acting out of an erratic combination of fear and suspicion and anger, because there's another person reading the signs of what to come and positioning themselves appropriately.

"Madam Umbridge," Percy says politely, giving her a short but formal bow.

She looks up from her desk, where she's using a very large and pink quill to write what is undoubtedly a scathing letter to someone. The ink drips messily off the end of the quill and she murmurs a harsh charm. The splatter sizzles off the page. Not Percy's preferred approach, but effective nevertheless.

“Mr. Weasley,” she responds, giving him an appraising look. “I had the—pleasure of meeting your father yesterday.”

Percy smiles tightly. “My father and I do not speak often,” he replies, hoping she will read between the lines and reach a favourable conclusion. “In fact, it would be more accurate to say we hardly speak at all.”

Her gaze turns assessing. “I see.”

“I wanted to give you this,” he says before she can say anything else. With another short bow, he hands over a neatly bound scroll, written out in his very best handwriting.

She unrolls it with another abrupt tap of her wand, the ribbon wilting into slivers. She scans it with quick, short movements and then looks up at him with an air of exaggerated surprise. “Why, Mr. Weasley, this is—unexpected.”

“Forgive my impertinence, ma’am,” he responds smartly. “But I had a feeling you may be...turning your attention to Hogwarts, and I wanted to give you my perceptions as a recent Hogwarts graduate.”

He’d spent the night writing out his suggestions for ways Hogwarts could improve, and only a few of them were meant specifically to appeal to Umbridge. There are many ways Hogwarts could improve, and he may as well take this opportunity to fell two pixies with a single spell.

“And why would you believe I may be turning my attention to Hogwarts?”

“Everyone knows Dumbledore is a threat to the Ministry,” he says, widening his eyes as if surprised she would even ask. “And a threat to the Ministry is a threat to us all. A threat to the very order of our society. Any of us doing our duty would rush to right the wrongs of our education system before they afflict any more young, vulnerable minds.”

Well, he *is* laying it on a bit thick, but Umbridge’s smile is slow, almost like honey.

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Cedric, for reasons unknown to the general populace but rather more obvious to Percy, deigns to take an apprenticeship offer from Professor Sprout, thus becoming the first Hogwarts apprentice since McGonagall. Percy reads the announcement in the Daily Prophet and scowls despite himself. He has a suspicion that Dumbledore set Cedric up for this; certainly Cedric did not have any particular aptitude for Herbology as Percy remembers it, and if he'd been truly serious about seeking an apprenticeship it would have been wrapped up by the end of seventh year rather than hastily announced right before term. But the idea of the *Hogwarts Champion* returning as an apprentice makes for good headlines, and Percy can imagine that

Cedric wanted to stay close to the castle after the trials of last year. Certainly Cedric would be a great recruitment tool for coercing young, impressionable students into joining the Order.

At least he'll be there to keep an eye on Ron, Percy counsels himself. This year under Umbridge is the year much went wrong at Hogwarts, never to be repaired. Percy can't say he's upset that levelheaded, capable Cedric will be at the castle, but he wishes there was a bit less fanfare about it.

(Percy receives the news from his mother—smug, he daresays, the only correspondence he receives from her all summer—that Ron has been appointed a Prefect with only slightly less composure. The twins actually write him a short note as well, reassuring him that Percy was all but a Prefect in his own right, due to his insistence on evangelising the rules to anyone with the misfortune to be nearby, and there aren't any prizes to be won for being forcibly conscripted into the oppressive judicial system imposed by the professors of Hogwarts. This note actually makes Percy snort, and he keeps it with the other scant letters he has received from his other siblings, though the letter from his mother meets the bad end of his wand).

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August 1995

The Greengrass' summer ball is a lavish, glittering affair. Percy and Aunt Muriel purchase special robes for the affair, but even the knowledge that he is impeccably dressed does not quell the anxious murmurs in his stomach. Percy has never been to a formal affair before, not to mention a summer ball where there are *human servants*.

"Stand up straight, boy," Aunt Muriel hisses to him as they wait in line to pay their compliments to the hosts. "You've every right to be here, especially now that you're the Prewett heir."

Percy straightens obediently. They inch closer to the Greengrasses. Landon, sandwiched between his parents, looks tall and regal and dashing. Percy suddenly feels very certain that his dark blue robes are entirely the wrong colour for summer. Landon is wearing a light grey, and in the deepening dusk he seems to shimmer, whereas Percy feels more liable to melt into the background.

When they reach the hosts, Percy executes the complicated bow he'd practised, and out of the corner of his eye he sees Landon nod just slightly in approval.

"Lord Greengrass, I thank you for this opportunity to light our wands together in celebration of a new summer."

"I thank you for honouring it," Tobias responds crisply, inclining his head.

“Tobias,” Aunt Muriel greets Lord Greengrass effusively, forgoing a bow entirely. Percy blinks at the informality of *Tobias* and even Landon looks askance at his father.

Tobias doesn’t flinch. He takes Muriel’s gnarled hands in his own and kisses them warmly. “Muriel. I have been impressed with your heir.”

“Rather like Gideon, isn’t he?” Muriel says approvingly, gripping Percy’s arm tightly.

Something passes behind Tobias’ eyes, but the emotion is too complex and fleeting for Percy to name. “Indeed.”

As they walk away, Percy throws his aunt a questioning glance.

“Tobias was great friends with Gideon,” she says casually, as if it were not a revelation. “They spent summers at my house sometimes. They were both in Ravenclaw, of course. Fabian was in Gryffindor, as was Molly, but Gideon considered himself studious. Drove Fabian mad! He was always up for a bit of a lark, but Gideon was more cautious.”

Percy pictures Landon’s father being close friends with his uncle and shakes his head. Sometimes he wishes he had been allowed to be in Ravenclaw, able to escape the stultifying isolation of Gryffindor. Did Gideon and Tobias part ways, unable to agree on their stance on Tom Riddle, or had they merely drifted apart after Hogwarts?

Percy finds to his surprise that he is greeted by many of the attendees, several of whom compliment him on his promotion to the Junior Assistant of the Minister. It warms him, all of these rich and prominent purebloods keeping tabs on his career. Aunt Muriel is in her element. It surprises him, watching her entertain group after group. She knows all of the gossip for the last seventy years at least, and in this crowd, at least, her dramatic retellings of sordid stories seems to play well. Percy remembers always being a bit embarrassed at Aunt Muriel at various social functions, but though he’d thought the group of purebloods would be a haughty lot, they all laugh uproariously as Aunt Muriel slyly eviscerates each one.

Perhaps it is the air of intimacy that the ball creates, the *esprit de corps* born from being privileged and wealthy. He finds everyone to be surprisingly friendly, and in some cases, nearly gregarious.

“I am glad to see you are enjoying yourself,” Tobias says quietly at his elbow, nearly two hours into the affair. Percy flinches despite himself; he had not heard Tobias approach. The other man chuckles softly. “One ought to be aware, Mr. Weasley, particularly at an event like this.”

Tobias skillfully leads them both through a set of doors into a small private room, which he locks and wards efficiently. Percy watches him warily.

“I shall make this brief; you are making quite the impact at this party, Mr. Weasley, and I would hate to keep you from it,” Tobias says, beginning without preamble. “What happened at the end of the Tournament?”

Percy blinks, thrown. “What do you mean?”

“I have heard the rumours, of course. Do you believe them to be true?” Percy furrows his brows, not sure how to respond, and Tobias laughs, a short bark. “I do not have the time to dance around the topic, Mr. Weasley. I am sure you appreciate my need for accurate information, given what we spoke of last. I shall speak even more plainly: is He back?”

Percy purses his lips. Part of him knows he ought to claim ignorance, but the other part of him thinks of what is to come and knows it will be safer for Landon if Tobias knows the truth. “I believe He may be,” says Percy carefully. “Much is not known, but I think it may be…pragmatic to assume the unbelievable has occurred.”

Tobias sighs, seeming to deflate before Percy’s eyes. “We must leave,” he murmurs to himself. “He will not be content if I do not answer the call.”

“You must know, though,” Percy says suddenly, his eyes flicking to Tobias’ left arm.

Tobias shakes his head. “I was never Marked,” he says. “I did not correct your assumption last, though I will do so now. He wanted me, but my father claimed me as his heir, and set me to managing the business. I had no time to fulfil any rebellious urges I may have had.”

Percy hesitates, but he cannot help himself, and then blurts out, “You were friends with my uncle.”

Tobias’ sigh is long and in some ways longing. “Gideon was the best friend I ever had,” he says simply. “But friendship is not always enough when you are young and angry and filled with visions of your own glory.”

Percy understands that quite thoroughly.

“I am to this day in my father’s debt, for he saw what was coming and ensured I would take no part in it,” continues Tobias. “I will do the same for my son.”

“You think Landon would be…tempted?” Percy asks dubiously, thinking of his bookish, excitable friend.

Tobias smiles thinly. “I do not fear that my son will be tempted. I fear he will not be given the opportunity to choose otherwise. You should know that about Him, Percy; He takes what He believes He deserves, and once He has you, He does not let go.”

Percy shivers, thinking suddenly of all of those serious pureblood heirs that had presented him formally with welcome when he had become the heir of the Prewett family. Some had been from Dark families, but all certainly would come to the Dark Lord’s attention for one reason or another. He suddenly does not envy them their prominence in society.

“You can’t say anything,” Percy says, leaning forward urgently. “I can’t explain why, but it is very important that He not know that we know.”

Tobias nods thoughtfully. “I suppose Crouch has some sort of plan in place. Nobody hates Him more than Crouch—save Moody, perhaps.”

“I do not know what the plan is,” says Percy, entirely truthfully. Neither man has seen it fit to confide in Percy what they intend to do with the knowledge that the Dark Lord has returned. “But I believe nothing good can come if He knows there is one.”

“I will reveal nothing.” Tobias looks intently at Percy. “I have news for you as well, in return. The house of which you seek is in a town called Little Hangleton. Once a busy wizarding establishment, it is now primarily a Muggle town. I do not dare go myself, and I could find no photographs, but my sources tell me the last known location of the last known heir of the family we last spoke is definitely in that town.”

Percy could not say whether Tobias is speaking of Tom or Morfin, but he supposes it does not matter in the end. But Tobias cannot be right; Little Hangleton is where the *Riddle* family plot is, the *Riddle* mansion. There was no Gaunt mansion there.

Of course, perhaps the Gaunt mansion is so well hidden that Percy would have missed it. It would make sense for the Gaunts to live in the same area as the Riddles; how else would Merope Gaunt meet Tom Riddle? Percy will have to return to the area and investigate more thoroughly. It was silly of him to assume the Gaunt family manor would be out in the open, vulnerable to a Light wizard poking around for answers.

“Thank you,” Percy says, sweeping a low bow. He's been practising his bows all summer; this one says, according to the tilt of his head and the position of his arms, that he is in gratitude but not debt to the other person.

Tobias hesitates. “And another piece of advice, for free. I have said this before, but Percy—stay away from whatever is happening, if you can. He is not one to trifle with, nor attempt any sort of *mischief* under His notice.”

Which is, of course, precisely why Percy needs to finish his *mischief* as soon as humanly possible.

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Fudge comes in one day toward the end of summer bristling with anticipation. “We've got him,” he announces to the office at large, which consists primarily of Percy and the secretary, a young woman named Mathilda who has already crisply informed Percy that she deigned to take a secretarial position only because it furthers her career goals and will not be completing any work for anyone other than the Minister himself. Percy rather likes Mathilda, but he does not think she particularly likes him.

Mathilda instantly drops her usual scowl and bats her eyelashes at the Minister. Percy gives her a look behind Fudge’s back, which she ignores without a flinch. Mathilda had not existed in the last timeline, at least in close proximity to Percy, but Percy thinks Fudge hired her when Crouch only agreed to have Fudge have Percy three days of the week. It makes his

paystubs a nightmare to process, but it allows him to remain close to both men, so Percy thinks it is mostly worth the hassle. “Who?”

“Harry Potter, of course!”

Fudge is wearing one of his interview robes: dark green to match his bowler hat, shiny black shoes, white ruffled shirt. His moustache gleams, newly combed. It’s a look worthy of Rita Skeeter, but she’s been oddly silent, so Percy makes a mental note to read the *Prophet* tomorrow to see if there’s anything other than the usual nonsense.

“Underage magic,” Fudge announces, as if he’d revealed Harry Potter was on trial for murder. “In his *Muggle* neighbourhood. Can you imagine?”

Percy wants to roll his eyes, but Fudge is beaming at him expectantly, so he only nods and tries to look enthused. “He’s a reckless child, I’ve always said that.”

“Daring to flout the Ministry like that,” contributes Mathilda, not to be outdone. “Minister, it is an *outrage*.”

“Certainly it is,” Fudge says, bestowing upon her a rather sickeningly sweet smile. “And don’t you worry, dear, we’ll get him off the streets.” Percy sees the edges of Mathilda’s smile twitch, but to her credit she does not break her facade. “Weasley, you’ll be attending. Take good notes—that blasted Bones woman is already trying to argue we shan’t need a trial for such an egregious mistake. She’s angling for Minister already, even though elections aren’t for two years. But she’s backing the wrong centaur with Potter!” Fudge rubs his hands together in satisfaction and steps into his office without providing any additional details.

Mathilda sags back to her desk and glares at him. “Have fun at the trial,” she says nastily.

“Have fun sitting here, doing nothing,” Percy says cheerfully back. He knows, this time, that Fudge only keeps him close to artlessly pry about Harry, but in both timelines he is not above using Fudge’s attention for his own purposes.

The trial is not fun, however. Harry looks older and cleaner than when Percy saw him last, as if he'd shot up over the last few months. He doesn’t know where Harry’s been for the rest of the summer, but he can guess that he spent at least the last night wherever the infamous Black family residence may be, under the tender ministrations of Molly Weasley. Harry’s hair is cut, parted and combed, he’s wearing clean robes—though his Muggle trainers are smudged, as usual—and his face has been scrubbed so hard Percy can still see a faint glow on his cheeks. But the expression on his face, mulish and determined, is all Harry, no matter what appearance to the contrary he is trying to project.

He looks terribly small, standing there all alone, as the full body of the Wizagamot gathers itself. He doesn’t seem to notice Percy and Percy does not draw attention to himself. He hears some of the members mutter to themselves and privately agrees with their irritation; a full trial, just for underage magic? For anyone other than Harry Potter, they’d be given a small fine and perhaps a strict talking to, but hardly any special attention.

Dumbledore is late, striding in at the last possible moment. Fudge seems to wilt in his seat but recovers quickly. Dumbledore claims the trial was rescheduled, but it's been on Percy's planner since yesterday afternoon. Perhaps it is merely a ploy to paint himself as Harry's saviour. Certainly Harry brightens considerably when Dumbledore comes banging into the room, watching him snap at the Minister with wide, fond eyes.

Yes, yes. Only Dumbledore is there for Harry. Never the Ministry, never any other adults, only Albus Dumbledore. But critically, Harry will always feel alone at the beginning of his ordeals. He must trust absolutely in Dumbledore but not rely on him. Percy snorts to himself and presses more viciously on the parchment than is absolutely necessary, nearly breaking the nib of his quill.

Harry gets off, of course. *Cleared of all charges*. The trial is clearly a farce; if they'd really meant to charge Harry with something specific, then it would take more than a Squib's testimony to have all the charges dismissed. Even Fudge couldn't possibly believe a Patronus Charm would be so damning as to expel Harry Potter, even despite the smear campaign that plays out daily in the papers. Likely his plan is merely to continue to discredit Harry, paint him as reckless and wild. Harry chases Dumbledore out of the cavernous room—though Dumbledore walks away even faster—and Percy sighs, gathering up the transcript. Umbridge stalks over to Fudge, who flushes ruddy at the sight of her incensed face. Percy follows them discreetly out of the chamber, hoping to overhear their conversation.

"Did you see him?"

Percy flinches and spins, flicking his wrist to activate his wand holster, but it's only Crouch, nearly invisible next to a large golden statue of—Percy checks the inscription—the first Chief Warlock. He sends a regretful glance to the disappearing figures of Umbridge and Fudge and then turns to face Crouch. "Harry Potter, sir?"

Crouch nods. "How does he look?"

They begin to make their way toward the Department of International Magical Cooperation, dodging the multitude of red-frocked Wizengamot members, huddling like birds in the small atrium. "Angry," Percy replies when they're out of sight. "Must be difficult to be him right now."

"And with Dumbledore barely coming to his defence," Crouch agrees, shaking his head. "I wonder what he's planning."

It is true that Dumbledore has not said anything publicly, save for his speech at the end of last year to the students that was reprinted in full in the *Prophet*. "Certainly he's planning something."

"You do not know?"

Percy gives Crouch a sideways look. "I do not speak to Dumbledore."

"Rumour has it your entire family is under his protection," Crouch says dryly, raising an eyebrow. "You are saying that does not extend to you?"

Percy's face sours and he begins to walk more quickly. "I have spoken to Dumbledore maybe once or twice in my entire life," he says defensively. "Whatever protections he extends my family are due to their own affairs."

Crouch looks around and leans in. His breath is warm and wet on Percy's cheek. "You have not been asked to join his—Order?"

Percy is momentarily surprised, though he supposes that of course the old guard knows about the Order of the Phoenix. Likely it came out during the trials after the last war, trials which Crouch would have presided over. But if it is common knowledge that his family is under Dumbledore's purview, does that offer them protections or merely paint targets on their backs? Is it good for strangers to assume the same of Percy—or does he need to make it clear where his loyalties lie?

"No," Percy responds truthfully, striving for an even voice that would not betray his resentment. "I have not been asked to join."

"Neither have I," reveals Crouch. "Though I expect Alastor has. I thought he may want to coordinate some sort of strategy, but he is more paranoid than usual."

What is the point of a secret Order if everyone can guess who may be in it? Although it is surprising to Percy that Crouch had not been approached, at least by Moody. Any man willing to send his own son to life in Azkaban for being a Death Eater would certainly be useful to the cause, or at least unlikely to betray it.

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September 1995

The next few weeks are a haze of drafting Fudge's interviews, attempting to ingratiate himself with Umbridge, and balancing Crouch's ever-increasing demands. Percy finds it uncomfortably easy to compose pithy comments or harsh condemnations for the Minister to parrot during his daily briefings, but he reassures himself that none of Fudge's bluster really comes to anything, in the end.

(Percy does write a letter to Harry when he hears that he received a detention in his very first class with Umbridge. *Keep your head down,* he counsels. *It is better to make allies quietly than to make enemies publicly. Without proof, your story is backed only by your word, and your word is nothing short of unreliable.*

Given that Harry continues to loudly rail against Umbridge, Percy thinks that his letter did not make very much impact, but at least he tried to rein in their Chosen One, which is more than anyone in his family seems to be doing).

And though mist curls over the British moors, and Muggles report strange incidents, and the weather grows dark and unpredictable—the Dark Lord is not really doing anything in particular.

Nevertheless, Tonks is exceedingly busy, or so the lack of owls from her would imply. Percy tries to not be annoyed; three years ago he'd barely written to her for an entire year, and she'd forgiven him with only minimal irritation. He only wishes he knew what she was doing—or even where she was, for he'd dropped in on her office more than once to see it cold and empty, leftover food wilting in the corner, the preservation charm long extinguished. Moody's office looks much the same. When Percy finally meets Tonks for lunch, she doesn't apologise, merely greeting him brightly as if it had only been a week rather than several months since he last saw her.

She looks stressed, tired, and thin, but nevertheless exhilarated, sporting lurid pink hair in a jaunty cut. He squints at her face. Makeup, if he had to guess.

"Have you been seeing anyone?" Percy asks casually.

Tonks looks up, momentarily pausing in her decimation of two turkey sandwiches, one in each hand. (Percy, by contrast, has been merely picking at the wilted lettuce that even a freshening charm can't enliven).

"I see people all the time."

Percy rolls his eyes. "No. Seeing someone. You know."

She gives him a mischievous smile. "Oh, in the biblical sense, you mean." Percy is not religious but he can infer the reference well enough to blush. "I'm honoured you think I have the time to get laid," Tonks says cheerfully. "Why? Am I exuding some sort of blessed glow? That's what the girls in my dorm would always say when someone got shagged. *Look at you, you're glowing*!" She mimics the last in a high pitched tone, widening her eyes suggestively at Percy.

"Not necessarily getting shagged," Percy says with a cough. "Just—seeing someone. Going on dates."

"Well, I spend most of my time with Moody, but he *is* single," Tonks says musingly. "Do you think that counts?"

"Where have you been spending your time?" Percy counters, dropping the topic for now. He has absolutely no idea how Tonks falls in love with Remus Lupin, but he supposes it must happen fairly soon. They'll be married within the year, if he remembers correctly, with a child on the way in two. Maybe they are already practising their caretaking skills on Sirius Black.

In two years, Tonks will be a *mother*. Many in the wizarding world marry young, but Tonks is twenty one, or twenty two? He can't quite remember off the top of his head. He watches her tear the crusts off her sandwich with her hands and cannot conceptualise how she

becomes a mother before twenty five. Percy is significantly older than that, if one counts both timelines, and he barely feels qualified to take care of a partner, let alone a child.

“The London house, of course,” Tonks says, waggling her eyebrows. “I was surprised never to see you there, you know.”

“I was never invited.”

She blinks at him. “What? Of course you were. There’s more rooms there than for all of us combined. Honestly, Sirius would welcome the company, what with Remus off half the time trying to find some werewolves to woo.”

“I was never invited,” he repeats, irritated.

Tonks pauses and looks at him more carefully. “To the house, or to…”

He drops his voice. “To the Order.”

“Are you *serious?*”

Her clear incredulity, rather than mollifying his feelings, only serves to irritate him even more. “Dumbledore didn’t want me. I don’t know how more clear I can be.”

“You’ve got to be mistaken,” Tonks says, shaking her head. “Honestly, Percy. Your whole family—all of us—I mean, well, how could you not be? The only reason you wouldn’t be one of us is if you’re one of them.”

For one terrible second, he sees doubt in her eyes.

“Well, Dumbledore must think I’m one of them, because I’m certainly not one of you,” he says nastily, standing. “Enjoy wooing Remus.”

“Percy, wait—wait, *what*?”

He navigates his way out of the cafeteria with quick, sure steps, his heart beating. He knows rationally that it is not Tonks’ fault that nobody is very interested in soliciting his help, but equally so, he cannot forget the look in her eyes as she questioned whether he may be one of *them*. Percy wonders if Tonks had been asked to put her inheritance toward the Order, or whether that would be considered double dipping in the Black vault.

As Percy strides back towards his office, Jamila Jellins, Rita Skeeter's fervent enemy, sidles out from behind a stack of shelves, her distinctive black hair partially hidden behind a jaunty cap. "Mr. Weasley," she purrs. "Just the man I was hoping to see."

"Mrs. Jellins," he says coolly. "What can I do for you?"

She gives him an appraising look. "Do you have a minute?"

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Percy does not say anything in the *Prophet* that Fudge has not already said in interviews based on Percy's notes—but the impact of his words ripples far beyond what he would have thought. Fred and George write him another letter, considerably less friendly than the last (*there's being ambitious and there's being a traitor, Percy*), he catches several of his colleagues whispering about him, huddled around desks, and he receives a memo on scented pink paper, asking him to tea when Umbridge returns briefly from Hogwarts next Wednesday.

His father, to Percy's eternal embarrassment, confronts him *in the office*, in clear eyesight of several Ministry employees—including Mr. Crouch!—in what is a pathetic revision of the fight they'd had the first time around.

The issue, Arthur explains in a very loud and agitated whisper, is not that Percy is praising Dolores Umbridge, but rather that he is criticising Albus Dumbledore.

"He needs our support, Percy," Arthur says urgently. Percy throws up a privacy ward, though he can't prevent his colleagues from watching them intently. The bullpen in the Department of International Magical Cooperation is much more crowded than the quiet, sparse inner office of the Minister.

"He needs your support, perhaps," Percy agrees. "But he certainly doesn't need mine."

"He'll let you *in*, I've already spoken to him. It was a rather bad show to refuse to give the money, but there's plenty you could do," Arthur says, dropping his voice.

Percy sniffs. He knows, logically, that he should just swallow his pride and go be Dumbledore's little lapdog for the sake of the greater good, but some old instinct stiffens his spine and lends a snap to his tone. "There's nothing I wish to do. This is my job, Father; my *career*. Dumbledore hasn't done a single thing for me, and I'm hardly going to throw away what may be my only chance at success because he wants to run his school like the personal training grounds for Harry." Here Percy drops his voice too. "And if He is back—and I'm not saying he's not—then Dumbledore has to decide whether he wants to run an army or a school, it can't be both."

Arthur seems to finally realise the need for discretion and tugs Percy down the hall and into a small supply closet. "He is back, Perce," his father says seriously. "And we all need to be prepared."

"I am prepared," Percy says, thinking of a portrait hanging in his room that is nearly done. All that's left is the potion, really. He just needs to get back to Hogwarts and enlist Snape for the final part. "My methods of preparation may differ from yours, but that does not mean I am not thinking ahead."

"It's not just about you, Perce. It's the whole family. We need to stick together."

"We can stick together without me slavishly following Dumbledore," Percy insists. "And anyways, oughtn't we have some sort of spy in the Ministry?"

"We have spies," snaps Arthur. "We need you to look after your family."

"I could say the same about you. Ron's got a bloody big target on his back, and what about Ginny?"

"What about you, Percy? Dumbledore told us you wrote in that diary too."

Percy stops, chest heaving, and looks at his father. Days of painting his face, focusing on the lines of his cheeks and the way his eyebrow tufts, has given Percy an insight into his father's features that is at times startlingly intimate. "I can take care of myself, Father."

They stand, silent in the way that settles awkwardly after a fight has lost its steam.

"I know you, Perce," says his father after a beat. "I know you are a good person, and you are brave, and you care for this family. I know it is not always easy for you to feel like a part of this family. But don't get swayed by promises of promotions or glory. None of those things matter in the end, not really."

Percy is incensed all over again at the condescension. "I'm an adult," he says, with the weight of two lives behind his words. "I can make up my own mind about what matters to me. Is it too much to ask for your support?"

Arthur sighs heavily. "Support goes both ways, Perce."

Lucius Malfoy also shows up at his desk—but at a time when Percy is working on something for Fudge. He stands silently in the doorway until Mathilda notices him; her loud cough startles Percy out of his concentration right in the middle of a sentence.

“Oh—Lord Malfoy,” he exclaims, jumping to his feet. His quill, hastily discarded, smears ink over the draft, but Percy tries to ignore it. He gives a short bow.

Lucius surveys him. “Mr. Weasley.”

“Are you here for Minister Fudge?”

But it proves unnecessary for Percy to say anything else, as Fudge appears instantly, with the instincts of a career politician. “Ah, Lucius,” he says heartily. “I suppose you are here to talk about the new Auror division?"

New Auror division?

Lucius smiles thinly. “I am afraid not, Minister. I am here for your assistant.”

Fudge looks between Percy and Mathilda, clearly debating whether a woman or a blood traitor would be more likely to be of interest to Lucius Malfoy. Mathilda’s smile is fixed; Percy reckons she doesn’t want to be Lucius’ target for any of the reasons that Fudge imagines she is.

“Mr. Weasley is a—charge of mine,” Lucius says smoothly. “I am sponsoring him, of course.”

It is difficult to say which of the three members of the audience is more flabbergasted by that news. Percy recovers quickly. “I appreciate all that you do, Lord Malfoy.”

“Right, of course,” Fudge says, looking at Percy with new interest. “Weasley is a bright chap, sure to do great things. I hadn’t realised your...interest in him, Lucius.”

“It is nascent, I admit,” Lucius drawls. He nods his head at Percy. “Come, Mr. Weasley. We have much to discuss.”

Their journey through the Ministry is definitely calculated to pass the greatest number of departments. Percy wants to cringe as heads turn and mouths gape at Percy’s shock of red hair next to Lucius’ blond mane. His father will *definitely* hear about this, and Percy doesn’t think he’s up for another fight with Arthur Weasley, particularly one over Lucius.

“Stand straight, boy,” Lucius hisses out of the corner of his mouth. Percy straightens obediently, though the tips of his ears turn red at the admonishment. As he’d done often since learning Lucius Malfoy at one point wanted to marry Molly Prewett, Percy imagines him as his father. Does Draco walk next to Lucius with ease or does he too feel like an ugly toad waddling after an elegant swan?

Lucius’ office is not quite as grand as Fudge’s, but it is luxurious and large, which is particularly interesting considering that he does not hold an official position with the Ministry. Apparently being a Lord is credential enough. Percy looks around the room, outfitted in tasteful and doubtlessly expensive wood furniture, and wonders if the keys have been handed down father to son for decades.

Lucius settles behind his desk and then raises an eyebrow at Percy, who starts suddenly and hastens to take the seat opposite. Sitting with Narcissa in the lovely, light-filled east parlour of her home, talking lightly of gossip and manners and art, is very different from sitting opposite Lord Malfoy in the centre of the Ministry. Percy must tread carefully.

“My wife tells me you are a talented artist.”

Percy straightens and smiles. “Lady Malfoy is very generous,” he says, aiming for a laugh. Lucius looks unamused.

“You wish to be a portrait artist?”

“Er, possibly.” Did Lucius bring him here merely to quiz him on his career aspirations? “It is a rather fascinating blend of Potions and Transfiguration, you see.”

“Yes, of course,” Lucius responds. “Severus mentioned you were quite the scholar. Not many young Gryffindors are willing to brave the dungeons for...information.”

Percy swallows. “Well, knowledge is power,” he offers weakly.

Lucius clasps his hand over the head of his cane and looks intently at Percy. “If you are the type of boy Severus believes you to be, then I do not imagine you will waste your time painting portraits. Tell me, Mr. Weasley. What is it you wish to do with your talent?”

The problem is, of course, that Percy has no bloody idea what he wants to do, save for the conspicuous exception of wanting to kill the Dark Lord. He tries to take a breath to cool the nerves fluttering in his chest and stomach. It’s just a job interview, isn’t it? Well, not quite, but pretending so calms him. “I have many interests,” he says, trying to sit even straighter. “Magic, knowledge, information. I do believe knowledge brings power, and at my age, I must gain both in equal measure.”

“Indeed,” Lucius says noncommittally. “Yet you turned down a prestigious apprenticeship in order to work at the Ministry.”

“Lord Malfoy, if I may be blunt, I enter this realm—this arena, if you will—at a disadvantage,” Percy says, meeting Lucius’ eyes. He is not any more embarrassed to say this to Lucius than he was to say the same to Narcissa; the difference in their social standings is so great that it would be the greater shame to ignore it. “I do not have contacts that are willing to help me, or insights into how our society operates. Scholarship is but one type of knowledge.”

“Politics is quite another,” Lucius agrees. “So I take it you are not as easily swayed as the rest of your family.”

Percy feels his back moisten with sweat. “If you are speaking of Harry Potter then I do believe myself to be more critical of him than my family,” he says carefully. “Potter is just a boy. I do not believe he necessarily acts with malice, but I do believe he is being led blindly by those more...” he trails off.

“Intentional,” Lucius offers dryly. “I hear you provided Madam Umbridge with invaluable insights into the weaknesses, shall we say, of Hogwarts.”

“Hogwarts could be great,” Percy says, on more solid ground now that they have moved from speaking of Harry Potter. “In many ways Hogwarts *is* great—but I believe those ways are entrenched in our tradition and survive despite, not because of, current decisions made by those in power. A proper wizarding education is one of our birthrights, and I believe to deprive us of that is a crime.”

Lucius Malfoy does not like Dumbledore. Percy does not like Dumbledore. There is no need to speak of Dark Lords or dark magic or anything else controversial; on this one topic they can agree with equanimity.

“If I may be so bold, Mr. Weasley, what is it that you seek?” Lucius asks, more intently now, gripping the head of his cane tightly.

“I’m sorry?” Percy asks to give himself more time. Money, power, respect—all of these are answers he cannot give to Lucius.

“I can see you are acting intentionally,” Lucius says with a hint of impatience. “But your motives remain unclear.”

“Oughtn’t they?” Percy responds. “I cannot think of why I would want my motivations to be more obvious, at the present moment.”

Lucius’ lips twitch. “Touché, Mr. Weasley. And if it is knowledge you seek for now, I believe I have some that would be of interest to you.” He snaps his fingers and a large, heavy tome flies from one of the bookshelves and settles slowly onto his desk. Percy looks at it and then double-takes. *Magicke of the Blood,* it says, in intensely curling letters, silver on top of deep blue leather, nearly black. The book is clearly old, but in pristine condition. “You may borrow this.”

Percy looks up. *What’s the catch?* Loyalty, service, knowledge?

“Quite frankly, Mr. Weasley, I see dozens of bright young men every year seeking fame and glory in the Ministry,” Lucius says, answering his unasked question. “Many of them prove to be disappointments to me. I merely wish to see whether you will be the same.”

The book, Percy finds when he pursues it later that night, *is* very old, at least seven hundred years, judging by some of the arcane references. Luckily, Percy is proficient in the poorly spelled English-Latin blend that warlocks typically used at the time, since he had carefully studied it in his second first year, correctly foreseeing he’d have to look through many such books for information.

It is also very, very Dark, even for a time period characterised by a loose interpretation of magical morality. But it is also very interesting. Percy leafs through an entire chapter detailing the difference between Muggle and Wizarding blood—and finds to his surprise that many of the conclusions are well-reasoned. Magic *is* in the blood, he’s sure of it, even if he doesn’t know exactly what, and it would be foolish to try and pretend there is no difference between Muggles and wizards. Once you accept that difference, is it really so preposterous to assume there are differences between purebloods and halfbloods?

He looks up at the portrait of Tom, face frozen into a haughty blankness. He just needs to fill in some small surface level details and he’ll be finished. The entire process was surprisingly easy...too easy, he would say, if he did not have the necessary command on his magic to recognize that it was guiding his hand, pulling from his memory, filling in the gaps that his skill (or lack of) was wont to leave. Tom wanted to come back.

***

Dear Professor Snape:

I have discovered a rather interesting variant of the Pepper-Up potion that I believe has the ability to triple its efficacy, particularly with repeated usage. I found that replacing the oil of

peppermint with its close cousin, oil of thyme, had a significant increase in the level of steam produced with one dose. Furthermore, the addition—when brewed in a cauldron painted with life-giving runes—created a potion demonstrably stronger, suggesting smaller doses could be used, thereby increasing the yield of a single batch. I find brewing it in parallel five times over to be the most effective strategy.

With your permission, I am humbly requesting permission to visit you on the following Hogsmeade weekend to demonstrate my proposed enhancements.

Yours sincerely,

Percival Weasley-Prewett

***

No bloody response from Snape, so he writes to Umbridge, and she promptly invites him to take tea with her in Hogwarts the following Friday, instead of meeting her in her office at the Ministry.

Typical.

***

October 1995

Percy spends three very unpleasant hours translating Umbridge's notes, at times incoherent, into concise and rather damning reports, to be submitted to the Minister at the first opportunity. Percy can't help himself; he adds several of his own comments. He knows the inspections likely sum to nothing—he's only trying to befriend Umbridge so he can learn a bit more about what's happening with Fudge and at Hogwarts—but the professors at Hogwarts really ought to know their shortcomings and work to improve them. Particularly now.

"Such a pleasure to work with someone so capable," she sighs at the end of the period. "Some of the children here are so *difficult*. Even with repeated detentions, they *insist* on absolutely shocking behaviour."

"I do not find detentions to be a particularly effective deterrent for those unconcerned with their records," Percy replies, thinking, at least, of the twins. "And as those tend to be the ones causing mischief, it is a difficult conundrum."

“You’re right, of course,” she says thoughtfully. “You’ve got to make them *meaningful*, don’t you?”

He leaves her contemplating various punishment methods and navigates swiftly to Snape’s office, taking the opportunity to practise his continuous self-Transfiguration. Not that it matters; he does not pass anyone in the hallways that would have cause to give him a second glance, though he does manage to darken his hair wordlessly, so the practice is not entirely for waste.

It is apparent even from the doorway that Snape is in one of those moods where he reminds Percy of a cauldron simmering over a tightly controlled flame. Percy hesitates. Without looking up, Snape sighs irritably through his nose. "What."

"I convinced Umbridge to let me visit Hogwarts," says Percy in a rush.

Snape goes back to whatever he was writing. "Evidently."

Percy shifts his weight on each foot and then says, "I thought we might do the portrait potion."

"The painting is done?" Snape doesn't raise his head from the parchment, but Percy knows from the way his hand has stilled that he has Snape's attention.

“Was it not—clear from my letter?”

Snape takes a second to respond, as if Percy’s letter had made so little of a dent on his memory that he can barely recall its contents. “Subterfuge is not one of your strengths, Weasley.”

Percy forges on. "Well, I finished it last week."

"It is adequate?"

"I believe so." Percy thinks of Tom's painted eyes and then nods more confidently. "It is."

Snape sets down his quill and looks at Percy steadily, meeting his gaze for the first time. "You are to keep it in your vault and access it infrequently."

"Yes, sir," Percy says automatically. Then he winces; he's an adult twice over, and Snape is no longer his professor. He always means to establish a more equal relationship between them, yet somehow he never quite succeeds.

“I do not need yet another reckless teenager laying waste to carefully set plans.”

“You do realise that I am barely sixteen years younger than you in my current state—and if you add the extra eight I’ve lived in this life it brings our gap down to merely three, right?” Percy says acerbidly, and not for the first time. “I am not a child, *Severus*, even if I look it to you. We are *peers*.”

Snape wordlessly summons a large, heavily fortified vial. It hangs in front of Percy, and he's struck by the way the potion hisses and froths, even contained within the crystal.

"You—you completed it?"

Snape looks faintly amused. "What, you thought I would wait so we may do it together?"

Well, yes, Percy wants to say, but it suddenly sounds incredibly childish. They are at war; just because Percy had been looking forward to some semblance of normalcy, the intimacy that used to steal into their extra tutelage, doesn't mean that he should have expected Snape to be anything but focused.

“No,” he says instead. His smile is probably unconvincing, but he tries for it nevertheless. “Of course not.”

"It requires only the diadem."

Percy winces and reveals, "I took a vow to not destroy a Horcrux unless Tom ordered me to do so."

Snape gives him a disgruntled glare but does not bother to chastise him. "I'm not convinced this will destroy the diadem," Snape says, before he sighs and adds, "I will be at your apartment tomorrow night precisely at eleven at night. Be ready."

"You know where I live?"

The look Snape sends his way causes Percy's neck to prickle with unease, but his words are relatively benign. “Do you feel nineteen or thirty-one?”

“Thirty-two,” Percy corrects, for his birthday had just passed at the beginning of August. He exhales and pinches the bridge of his nose under his glasses. “Honestly, I do not know what I feel—how I feel. Some days I do feel very much like a teenager, and others…”

“Weary,” Snape says quietly. “As if you have already lived one life and cannot imagine living another.”

They meet each other’s gaze silently. Then Snape clears his throat. "You have not been asked to join the Order," comments Snape silkily. "Not quite to plan, is it?"

Percy scowls. He knows Snape well enough to know his casual insinuations stem frequently from habit, not malice, but he can admit the Order is a sore subject for him. "I planned to not join," he says obstinately. "There is use for me at the Ministry. Umbridge trusts me. *Fudge* trusts me."

"And yet Dumbledore does not. Tell me, Weasley. Do you even know of what the Order guards in the Ministry?"

Percy had not known the Order was guarding anything at all.

His expression must have said as much, for Snape begins to look darkly gleeful. "I must thank you for the advance warning of His return, but one wonders why you still believe you have a part to play in this."

"I do have a part."

"Chatting with dear Tom? Albus knows of the Horcruxes, Weasley, or at the least he suspects. I do not know precisely what he is doing but I imagine he is getting closer to the truth every day. The Order is on guard at the Ministry. Even Moody is mobilising the Aurors, those of whom he trusts. And you, Weasley?"

"I will find the Horcruxes," insists Percy. "What is the Order guarding?"

"Something the Dark Lord wants very much," answers Snape. "I shall tell you if you tell me why Dumbledore would so guard something so obvious, and in a way that should make it apparent to the Dark Lord that it is valuable."

"A trap, I suppose." Percy thinks of that horrible night when he realised he'd been completely, terribly wrong. "He wants to prove to the Ministry that Tom is back?"

Snape shrugs, but on him the motion is controlled and almost delicate. "Albus believes that, while Potter must be the one to defeat the Dark Lord, he might be able to weaken him."

"Where is he now? Do you—do you go to him?"

Snape abruptly looks tired again, any of the excitement from before sliding off him like dark oil. "Frequently," he says. "Far too frequently."

Percy gapes, a little. For all he knew that Snape is a spy, he hadn't quite imagined that Snape would be *frequently* speaking with the Dark Lord. "And—what is he like?"

Snape meets his gaze. "Determined. Powerful. He is for now obsessed with Potter, with the prophecy. I fear we have little time before he begins to act more broadly."

"One year," agrees Percy, thinking of before.

"So make your Tom speak, keep researching the Horcruxes, do what you must. I have not the time to devote to their discovery as I would have liked. Between your Minister and Albus and the Dark Lord—and Potter's infernal dedication to the art of trouble making—I cannot babysit you as you'd like, Weasley."

Percy opens his mouth to rise to the bait and then snaps it shut. Things for Snape cannot be any easier than they are for Percy, and arguing with his only ally would do nothing but introduce tension into an already fraught relationship. “Come tonight,” he says simply. “Thank you for your help, Severus.”

***

Cedric had invited him for a drink in Hogsmeade that evening, which had made Percy feel a bit better about his impulsive letter to inform the other wizard that he would be around. Percy is not sure why Cedric would like to spend extra time with him, but perhaps Cedric is as curious about what is happening in the real world as Percy is about what is happening at Hogwarts. It is a mutually beneficial arrangement of information, nothing more, though Percy has to admit privately to himself he is excited to have actual *plans* on this Friday night. Certainly it justifies his taking an entire day off for these errands.

Still, Cedric had said he would be free only in the evening, so with the benefit of the lynx, Percy makes it from Snape's office to the village with plenty of time to spare, even after stopping by Myrtle's bathroom to update her on the latest news. He purchases some candy—Mathilda has a bit of a sweet tooth—and new quills, and even peeks inside the old secondhand bookstore that had served him so well in school.

"That bloody bint up at the castle confiscated half my fare," the proprietor complains to Percy when Percy, surprised, inquires after several books and finds them all out of supply. "I've barely enough left to eek a living out of, and that's only if people are brave enough to come and buy them under her nose. *Dark Arts*, she says. Is it a crime to sell books on magic? I'm not handing you a wand and telling you to start working your way through them, assigning homework like a bloody professor. It's not a crime to *read*."

Percy purchases a few books on the history of Magical Britain and its creatures, the maze still top of mind, and slips out before the proprietor can try and lodge a more formal complaint.

Cedric is late to their agreed upon meeting at the Three Broomsticks, which is not a great start to this partnership, but Percy tries not to let it bother him unduly. He orders a hot tea and sips it, reflecting on his conversation with Myrtle. They had only the time for a quick chat, most of which was filled with her impassioned hatred of Dolores Umbridge. Her reign has lasted under two months, yet to hear Myrtle tell it, she's completely upended the very fabric of the school itself. (Percy pointed out that the fabric of the school must have been rather tenuous if a single witch could tear it within months, which had incited Myrtle to sniff angrily and dive through the floor).

Percy examines his feelings about aiding Umbridge—and then decides, as he often does, that he feels very reconciled to his choices. If the worst that comes of his Ministry reports is the pampered Hogwarts population having an unpleasant professor, it will be a price well paid to be positioned so close to the Minister.

"Hullo, Perce," says Cedric, startling Percy. Percy spins and finds his old classmate looking unfairly tanned and fit from all the gardening he's doing so heroically.

Percy isn't quite sure they are on levels of familiarity high enough to warrant *Perce*, but Cedric is a Hufflepuff, so perhaps the standards are different. "Hello, Cedric." He squints at Cedric, who has a bit of a flush around his cheeks. "Started already?"

Cedric grins easily and taps the side of his nose. "Just came from an exciting meeting, I'll tell you all about it. You may want to disguise yourself a tad; wouldn't do for me to conspire so

openly with a Ministry employee.”

Percy eyes Cedric doubtfully but waits patiently as Cedric orders two Butterbeers, taking the opportunity to once again practise his self-Transfiguration.

"Your transfiguration is excellent," Cedric stays admiringly, glancing over Percy's new look. "I'd take you for a Metamorphmagus if I hadn't gone to school with Tonks. Why didn't you stay for your apprenticeship?"

"I may come back to it," says Percy defensively. He'd forgotten too that Cedric and Tonks would have known each other, been in the same house, if only for a year or two. "McGonagall's given me an open offer."

"Well, I daresay you'll deserve it, whenever you get tired of the Ministry," replies Cedric agreeably. "It would be fun to have you around the castle. The professors are nice, but they get a bit dull. I end up spending a fair bit of time with my House, which I think is traditionally looked down upon. But, I've been hearing all the gossip. The students are not happy, Perce. Umbridge has them learning penmanship rather than spells."

"Really?" Percy asks, startled. He'd known that the students disliked the Ministry approved curriculum, but he had assumed it would involve the standard set of spells and defences for each year. And it's Ron's OWL year, too.

Cedric nods soberly. "I've…offered my services, in a way. I know it's unorthodox and you're a bit of a rule follower, but you know more magic than most people I could ask. I wanted to get your thoughts on the plan."

"What plan?" Percy asks cautiously.

Cedric grins again, the mischievous in the curve of his smile erasing any anxiety that may have been crinkling the corners of his eyes. "What if I told you that today was the first meeting of a new club to learn Defence under that old toad’s nose?”

Percy cannot say that he really *disagrees* with the plan that Cedric outlines for him, but he does not think it is optimal either. Harry, a Defence instructor? Even with Hermione’s memorisation of the library and Ron’s stubborn loyalty, Percy cannot imagine that Harry would be able to create an effective lesson plan and also handle a club of impetuous teenagers.

But at the same time, Percy knows more than most the importance of minimising the gaps in one’s own education. Hogwarts has not had a competent Defence teacher in all the time Percy was there, with the potential exception of Lupin, who missed so many classes he hardly ought to count. Even if Umbridge *were* teaching a proper Ministry approved curriculum, the students should take it upon themselves to train themselves for whatever may come. Even the average wizard has creatures in their garden and ought to know how to protect themselves from harm.

What Percy objects to is how casually the whole endeavour is laid out. Cedric seems not to think anything of telling him *the plan* in the middle of the Three Broomsticks, though Percy

is quick to raise a privacy ward. The students met openly in the Hog's Head, and to hear Cedric tell it, they all but signed their names to a public document stating their complicity.

"I can't tell you more than that, I'm afraid," Cedric says, finally realising there may be some need for discretion. "I think Hermione jinxed the parchment we all signed, I could sense it when I got closer to it. I think it'll curse me if I tell too much."

"What will your role be?" Percy questions, ignoring the issue of a jinxed parchment for now. He really ought to have words with Hermione; enacting retribution is not the same thing as preventing perfidy, and she really should know that. "If Harry is the leader."

Cedric shrugs one shoulder and exhales slowly. "I dunno, to be honest," he says, and his voice is suddenly low and serious. "On one hand, it's a bit of a lark, training under Umbridge's nose. On the other hand, you and I both know that these kids will need to know how to defend themselves."

"So you believe Harry, then?"

"Do you not?"

Percy wavers and then leans in close, dropping his voice. "Cedric, the Ministry is going through a *lot* of effort to discount what Harry is saying. More effort than just Fudge trying to save his own skin."

"Someone murdered my father," says Cedric coldly. "Someone in the Ministry, I'd wager. Someone in the Ministry stunned me so that Harry would have to face the Dark Lord alone. Someone in the Ministry is sabotaging an entire set of Hogwarts graduates, right when they need them the most. So what are you suggesting I do, Percy?"

"Someone in the Ministry is watching you all," Percy snaps back. "Someone in the Ministry is going to be watching you all very closely, and at least for now, a lot of someones in the Ministry have the power to make all of your lives very miserable." He pauses, chest heaving, but Cedric isn't flaring into anger like Percy would expect, merely watching Percy with dark, solemn eyes. Percy releases his own anger into the wind and is able to say, "For the students, for Harry and the rest—they know of the dangers that lurk outside the doors of Hogwarts, but they don't really think about them very much. I'd guarantee all those kids that signed their names to the page are thinking more of their OWLs and their rebellion and their Boy Who Lived than of their safety. If you're going to do this, do it *right*. Help them train for what's out there, and by Merlin's beard, don't do it in such an obvious way that you'll be shut down before you can do anything of use."

Cedric nods. "I want you to help, Percy."

"*Help?"*

"I know you're in a difficult situation, and I don't judge you for it. I don't know how you put up with Crouch and Fudge and the rest, but someone's got to do it, and I'd rather it be you than someone I don't know at all. But you forget I was only two years behind you in school, Percy. I've been hearing stories from your dad about how skilled you are with magic since

you went off at eleven and got yourself in advanced tutelage, an honour they later denied me, I might add. I know Defence but I don't know magic, not like you do."

For a second, Percy does not say anything, searching for some meaning in Cedric's eyes that seem to elude him.

Then he nods, once, and says shortly, "I will."

Cedric leans forward and grips Percy's forearm, ignoring the flinch that travels through Percy's body. "And I will look after your siblings like they were my own," he breathes quietly. "And maybe between the two of us, we can keep them all alive."

***

Dear Cedric,

Hope all is well at Hogwarts. I hear the students are giving Madam Umbridge quite a difficult time. I suppose that's what you expect for a school so poorly maintained.

I thought some more on what we last spoke. I of course am no dueller myself, and with the strength of our Auror department I shan't expect the average adult wizard to need many of these spells, but if you are interested in tailoring your apprenticeship to include protective magicks I have some suggestions. Please see enclosed a tentative course of study, and feel free to let me know if any of the relevant parties disagree.

I would stress that shield charms, nonverbal casting, and developing an instinctive response to dangerous situations are more useful than any individually flashy spells. An awareness of the need for discretion is equally paramount.

If you do run into Harry Potter, please impress upon him that the Ministry grows tired of his little escapades. He ought to be studying for his OWLs, rather than inciting violence. Knowledge is key, and perhaps some scholarly pursuits will inform him as to the danger inherent in spreading such tales.

Percy is about to sign his name in his best ostentatious calligraphy when he hears the faintest pop of Apparation outside his door.

He really only heard it because he'd heavily enchanted the entire flat, including the hallway outside. This particular enchantment amplifies sounds, which could be quite annoying when his next door neighbour brought another paramour home, but otherwise helped Percy feel more secure. It takes him a second to process the sound as Apparation, but the moment he does, he freezes in place, his wand sliding into his hand. *Snape's been compromised*, he thinks, inhaling sharply. It's still an hour away from when Snape had said he'd arrive, and nobody knows where he lives.

He flicks his wand at the portrait, conjuring a cloth to cover it. Another flick and he's Disillusioned himself, a spell he's become quite comfortable with in recent years. Then he creeps quietly to the door.

After the Triwizard Tournament, Percy installed televisor charms on his door, inspired by the small, square monitoring charms he'd seen in the wards. This serves useful now; with a silent tap of his wand, a small square in his door shivers and turns transparent.

A hooded figure is outside, levelling his wand directly at the door.

Percy freezes, panic spreading like cracks of ice over his veins. The figure casts a web of light over the door, but Percy's wards hold up.

Think, Percy counsels himself. He needs to Stun the figure, but he can't do so from inside. He can't merely hope his wards hold, since he needs to know who is trying to break into his flat, and how they found him.

His flat is a standard indoor apartment; the door faces a hallway, and there aren't any windows he could try and lean out of to aim at the figure. Percy, one eye on the televisor spell, decides quickly: he will be ready once the figure breaks in.

He weaves a shield of wards, small and localised to his person, to protect against spells and hexes and even physical harm. He's just putting the finishing touches on the web when his door bounces open and the figure glides inside.

"*Stupefy,"* Percy says immediately.

The figure parries it without sound and returns a spell of his own, honing in on Percy's location despite the fact that Percy is still invisible.

Percy blocks it and sends a volley of spells back, giving him enough time to wrap a spell around the entire set of wards, hopefully allowing them to travel with him.

He makes for the left side of the room, trying to run on quiet feet, trusting his wards to block any attack from behind. But when he turns, the figure turns with him, and the next spell out of his wand once again flies directly at Percy's chest.

How is he tracking Percy? Annoyed, Percy casts a Dark spell that fills the entire room with blinding lights and then another that causes the floor and walls to shake with an impossibly loud siren, the latter taught to him by Nymphadora Tonks and meant to be used for crowd control. He follows it up with several spells meant to obfuscate: fog and smoke and flashing lights.

"Enough," the figure says sternly, and through the haze Percy sees him slash his wand in an attempt to cut through Percy's spells.

It doesn't work. Percy may not be a particularly adept dueller, but he is a powerful wizard, and has nothing better to do than hunt a Dark Lord and invent spell variants.

The figure pushes back his hood to reveal a distinctly unimpressed Severus Snape. "End it, Weasley."

"Not until you prove your identity," Percy yells over the din.

"I know your secret, and that of the ghost Myrtle," Snape replies irritably. "Do you wish me to shout it from the rooftops?"

"Why are you here?"

"To finish the bloody portrait potion, which you can't due to an idiotic vow that *you* took," Snape replies, aggrevied. He slashes his wand again, more violently than the last, and the wail cuts out abruptly.

Percy ends the remaining spells, though he trains his wand on Snape still. "Why are you early?"

"I wanted to see your defences," Snape replies. "The door was pitiable; barely kept me out. This strategy? Hardly tenable. If you see a Death Eater at your door you hide your things and run, do you understand? You're not nearly capable enough to fight a skilled Death Eater, and we cannot have you die before the end."

Percy lowers his wand, smarting from the admonishment. "How could you tell where I was?"

"You layered so many wards around you that anyone with any measure of sophistication could sense the accumulation of magic," Snape says, walking further into the apartment. His eyes take in every detail, and though Percy had scrupulously cleaned every room as if his mother were the one visiting, Percy suddenly feels sure that his entire place is a disgrace. "That and, you forgot to ward against sound, I could hear you breathing."

Damn, there was always something. "Well you're here now," Percy says, resolving to spend the entire weekend bolstering his defences and devising a strategy for quickly fleeing. He'll need provisions, a way to hide all evidence without seeming like he hid all evidence, a place to stay, a way to monitor what was happening at his flat in his absence, perhaps a store of gold somewhere that is not Gringotts, and an emergency way to contact his family and/or Snape and/or McGonagall if needed. To begin. "Let's get started."

Snape nods brusquely and produces a large silver cauldron from somewhere in his cavernous robes. "We are to use silver," he lectures, clearing a space on Percy's rug and lighting an everlasting fire. Percy flinches but does not say anything as the flames dance just above his rather expensive rug. "Why?"

"The diadem is silver," he replies automatically.

"We wish the potion to accept the base of silver from the diadem as merely an infusion of strength," Snape confirms, setting the cauldron to hover above the flames. He summons the potion from where Percy carefully kept it on the kitchen counter and directs a small but steady stream into the cauldron. "I modified the recipe for transport, so we need now to aerate it and allow it to simmer, breaking down the preservation and returning to its natural state."

Percy nods and positions himself closer as Snape explains the theory behind the potion. The problem, Snape lectures, is two-fold: firstly that the potion takes the traditional resurrection base of blood and bone. "Similar, interestingly, to the potion He used to return, with Potter's blood and his father's bone." They, of course, have only the diadem, which is in itself the second problem. "I believe the diadem's protective properties will transfer to the portrait. We extract only the soul. This is why only a potion would work, and not a spell. We ask the soul to permeate the entire mixture instead of attempting to isolate it."

Percy nods again. They've both gone through the theory independently, of course, but it calms Percy to hear it all again out loud. It's not quite the same as preparing the brew with Snape, but it nevertheless calms and steadies him.

While Snape had been talking, the mixture has become impossibly hot; Snape directs the flames to actually wrap around the entire cauldron, so the steam rising from the top is enough to heat the entire flat. Percy is dripping with sweat already and they have not even begun the difficult part.

"You are to attempt a reverse transformation," Snape tells Percy, who has been practising that very thing for the last few weeks. "If your vow prevents it, you shall back away at once and allow me to step in. Now. We shall proceed. In five, four, three, two—"

"*Amonaphora,"* Percy incants, holding his wand steady on the diadem. He's become intimately familiar with its component parts, and as it hovers in the air he goes through them one by one. First the rubies break off, and then the diamonds, and the emeralds, and then each of the other gems in turn. He's been able to confirm these were added later to the diadem, likely by an overzealous heir, and so do not technically need to be part of the potion; he directs them with his wand to the side, where Snape carefully wraps each one in a soft cloth. That task complete, Snape begins murmuring an incantation of his own as he stirs, preparing for the rest of the diadem.

Percy sends another surge through the spell. Next is the elaborate detailing on the tiara; this slides off it and into the cauldron like icing melting from a cake. Each spiked tip breaks off, and then the entire backing. When Percy is left with just a silver circlet, he pushes again with his magic, and the diadem begins to shake violently in the air. The Horcrux does not want it to change form, but Percy forces it with all of his strength, and it begins to flip through forms petulantly, first a small dagger, then a hand held mirror, then a long, pointed wand.

"*Amonaphora,"* Percy says through gritted teeth. *Come on, Tom*, he commands it. *I need you to speak to me.* The diadem hovers in the air as if considering Percy, and then abruptly melts into the cauldron, the molten silver oozing into the rest of the potion.

"Away," Snape orders, and Percy collapses into his armchair, feeling exhausted. Snape shifts until his entire body is over the cauldron, still encased in flames, and leans into the steam as if he's inhaling it. For the first time Percy sees Snape truly engrossed in his work, responding to minuscule changes in the consistency or heat or colour or smell with the tiniest, most delicate of changes. He whispers to the cauldron the entire time, too low for Percy to hear whether he is incanting magic or merely speaking to the brew.

Finally he sits back on his heels and allows a rare smile to cross his face. "It's done."

"And the Horcrux?"

"You certainly did not destroy it during your Transfiguration," Snape muses, giving the cauldron an affectionate stir. "Our simplest solution is to destroy the portrait completely once we have the information we need."

Percy nods and then waves his wand to uncover the portrait. He busies himself by fetching the supplies he'll need to apply the potion while Snape surveys the portrait.

"Surprisingly well executed," Snape murmurs in a soft voice surprisingly devoid of derision, and he reaches with one hand as if to touch Tom's youthful face. Then he pulls his hand away violently and turns on Percy. "I hope whatever errors you made do not drive him mad, and consign our efforts to be for naught."

Percy doesn't respond. He hopes that too.

The wand tipped brushes are elegant, their handles covered with intricate lines and yet smooth to the touch. He'd ordered brushes with the same core and wood as his wand, and when he picks them up he feels a shadow of the same thrum that ran through his body his first time at Ollivanders. Oak and dragon heartstring, twelve and a half inches long.

"I have to return soon," Snape says irritably from behind him. "And time now, Weasley."

"I have to concentrate," Percy replies chidingly. The potion hisses in the cauldron, but stills when he dips his brush in it. The potion is clear; when he lifts the brush he cannot tell anything is on the bristles save for water.

After years of Occlumency practice, not to mention his Animagus transformation, meditation comes easily to Percy. It takes him only a second of deep breathing to calm the riotous turmoil in his mind and focus only on the task in front of him.

Tom's face is frozen. Percy looks at it and thinks of the memories of Tom he still carries in his head, his sly smile and lofty retorts. For everything that Tom is now, he was once a sixteen year old boy, and Percy can admit in the detached privacy of his mind that he rather liked Tom at times—and he believes Tom may even have liked him too.

And Tom, as cruel and imperious and commanding as he is, was not unreasonable at sixteen. He'd admitted himself that he cared far more deeply for power and respect than blood. This Tom may still be swayed to give up the secrets of his Horcruxes, since this Dark Lord is mad and erratic and dangerous both to society and to Tom's vision of himself.

Only when Percy has firmly fixed this impression of Tom in his head does he lower his hand and layer a stroke of the potion on the bottom corner of the painting.

Nothing happens. Percy feels Snape shifting behind him but tries to ignore him.

What he needs, of course, is magic. He'd been so caught up in the first part of the process that he'd forgotten what Mr. Barrington said.

It *is* rather like the Animagus transformation, or at least like that first time. Percy breathes evenly and becomes aware of his magic crawling on his skin, raising the little hairs all over his body, flowing down his arms and into his fingertips. He can almost imagine the tips of the brush sparking with gold. He thinks of Tom, of nights in his Hogwarts dormitory, hesitantly reaching out with his magic as Tom guides him to a greater awareness of his magic.

Then he dips his brush again and drags it across the same square.

This time something sparks inside of him. Without hesitating he does it again and again, thinking of Tom, thinking of his magic. He covers the entire canvas methodically from bottom to top, not flinching even when he sweeps his brush over the dried paint of Tom's face. Only when he paints the top left corner does he pause, realising belatedly that his face is covered with beaded sweat, and his lips are dry.

"Fascinating," Snape says in a hushed voice, the reminder of his presence making Percy jump. "You entered a trance. Potion Masters are, of course, familiar with this type of continuous casting, but I did not know it applied to portraiture as well."

Percy smiles weakly. He watches as the last of the potion fades into the portrait. "So you admit I did something talented?"

"Well that remains to be seen," replies Snape, some of his customary tartness returning to his voice. He steps to the side so he will be out of the portrait’s direct line of sight. "Wake it."

Percy takes another deep breath and then takes out his wand. "*Animare*," he commands, and after a torturous second, Tom Riddle blinks open painted blue eyes. Percy inhales sharply, and even Snape, to the side, seems to flinch at the sight, judging by the rustle of his robes.

Tom blinks again. Then he stretches, a bit like a cat, and looks around him in some interest. He takes in the bookshelves of painted books behind him, the table with writing supplies, the leather couch half hidden by his body, the ornate globe on his desk, and lastly, the green and silver accents on the rug beneath his feet. All carefully chosen and rendered by Percy.

Percy holds his breath. If Tom doesn't accept his surroundings, his reality—he could be driven mad.

Tom turns to him, and his face is cold and commanding. "Where am I? Who are you? Where is my wand?"

Percy freezes in indecision. What if the Dark Lord did sense the portrait—and is spying on him right now through his eyes?

That would be impossible, he counsels himself.

"Who are you?"

Percy worries his lip and then decides to act as if he *is* being observed. He bows shallowly and murmurs, "My Lord."

Tom peers down at him and then frowns. "I do know you," he says after a second. "I remember you."

From the diary? The diadem?

"You do?"

This Tom *was* made from the diadem. Percy waits in silence as Tom puzzles through something in his mind. Does Tom remember him because he interacted with the diadem, or because the diadem makes Tom wise?

"How did I die?" Tom says abruptly. Percy watches him reach for his wand and then come up short. Percy had not painted him one, of course. He did not know what Tom would be able to do with a painted wand but he would not risk it.

He has thought about what to say to Tom obsessively ever since the idea for the portrait first passed through his mind, and he had decided long ago that raw honesty, as much as possible, would be the most effective tool. Tom trusts very few people, and he'll be expecting Percy to lie.

"You may want to sit," says Percy, taking his own advice by summoning a chair and positioning it in front of the portrait. He moves the portrait after a second so that they will be at eye level. Snape is entirely motionless, watching with dark, inscrutable eyes. Aside from a brief glance in his direction, Percy ignores him.

Tom's expression does not change. Nor does he sit.

"You are a Horcrux," says Percy bluntly. "A damaged one. I repaired you and transferred you to this form so that we may communicate."

Tom still does not sit, but something flickers over his face too quickly for Percy to identify it. "A Horcrux," he repeats, his voice heavy with skepticism. "Those are but myths."

"Your first Horcrux was a diary, which you left with Abraxas Malfoy," Percy continues doggedly. "I believe you also made Hufflepuff's famed cup into a Horcrux, though I can't be certain. I found your diary and spoke to it, and together we released the basilisk like you did fifty years ago when you killed Myrtle Warren."

Now Tom does sit, though the graceful way he perches alertly on the painted chair suggests he could spring off at any moment. "But I am not dead?"

This will be the part that is difficult. Percy does not know if Tom believes him—likely not yet—but he hopes he has concluded that Percy could be at least a reliable source of information, if not a true ally.

"Yes and no," says Percy slowly. He sighs and then says, as if he's dreading saying it, "Fifteen years ago you were defeated by an infant boy. Nobody knows how, though I theorise the mother set up blood wards triggered to activate with her own sacrifice. Regardless, your body disintegrated and you were left as a shade, untethered. Everyone believed you were dead.

You spent the next fourteen years as a shade trying to find a body, and then four months ago you managed to resurrect yourself."

Tom leans forward, his eyes alight. "And?"

"I believe it went wrong," Percy says. He bites his lip and summons a sketch he had done of Voldemort's new form, based on his recollections from the previous timeline. He holds it up in silence.

"You lie," Tom hisses, much like his diary self had at the same revelation, but Percy shakes his head.

"I found your diary, like I said, and I told you what I told you now. You studied it and you concluded that you split your soul too many times, that you were unstable. Before you were defeated by the infant it was rumoured a dark ritual had made you mad. We planned to find the Horcruxes and combine them, resurrecting you in a form that would be stronger, closer to your true self."

Tom stands, towering over Percy even in his frame. "You lie," he repeats, his face twisted in hatred.

"He does not," Snape says, and Percy nearly jumps out of his chair. Snape gives Percy a withering glance and steps into Tom's line of sight.

"I know you," Tom says, barely audibly, looking at Snape intently.

Snape sweeps an impressive bow. "My name is Severus Snape, my Lord. I joined your ranks as a Death Eater in 1978. I discovered Mr. Weasley's intentions when he was at Hogwarts under my care and have been helping him ever since. I just returned from an audience with you earlier this evening, My Lord. He ordered me to—well, my Lord, He ordered me to poison another of your followers for being delayed to answer the call. My Lord, He is not thinking clearly. He has been in this form for nearly five months and shows no interest in consolidating power nor recruiting more followers nor even growing back to His full strength. My Lord, I would never entertain disloyal thoughts, but I believe we need you to take His place."

Tom looks evenly at Snape as if these revelations did not upset him, but Percy knows Tom, or at least knew a younger version of him, and knows Tom would be flattered to hear of this. The Dark Lord as he is today is a threat to Tom, someone to compete with or share the spotlight with. No wonder the Dark Lord did not make his later Horcrux capable of communication or agency; he would know he had the capacity to betray his own soul, given the opportunity.

“So you are a traitor.”

“Never, my Lord,” Snape says smoothly. “My Lord, if I may—you recruited me personally out of Hogwarts, nearly two decades ago. Even being in your presence was...intoxicating. This version of you is a mere shade of what you once were. I believe it is true loyalty to bring you back as you were, so you may continue what you once started.”

Tom purses his lips. "How do I know what you say is true?"

"I included books in your library I thought you may find useful," Percy pipes up helpfully. "Histories of the war, as well as some treatises on Dark Magic your younger self recommended to me."

Tom strolls over to the bookshelves as if he is merely checking references on a school paper and takes out a slim volume. This had been a particularly nifty piece of magic while painting the portrait, and he hadn't been sure it would work, but there seems to be words on the page. Percy exhales to himself in relief.

"You will leave me now," Tom commands.

"We will move you, my Lord, to somewhere more secure," Snape says obsequiously. "Perhaps a Gringotts vault?"

"No," dismisses Tom. "I wish to remain here. I shall not help you if you move me."

Percy sees a muscle in Snape's jaw clench but he merely bows and then waves his wand so the covering falls back over Tom's face.

They go into Percy's bedroom—a rather odd experience for him—and Snape wards it tightly. "You cannot fall under his thrall," he orders. "But as I cannot check in with you frequently, we must devise a way to ensure you are yourself."

"It is a Horcrux still," Percy confirms, moving past the point of his safety for now. "He seems to remember us wearing it."

Snape nods consideringly. "Limit your interactions. Remember, Mr. Weasley, when he is there he will be observing you carefully. You cannot give him any reason to doubt you."

Percy nods, feeling a thrum of excitement ignite. Finally after so many months of waiting he has a purpose again, and one in which he will surely excel.

"Fix your wards," Snape says, and then he disappears without any further comment.

Percy collapses in his bed. He will have to rouse himself to fix his wards, of course, but for a second he wants to exult in the luxurious feeling of having completed a goal, of stretching himself with fiendishly complicated magic and excelling at what needs to be done. In a way, he's brought back the Dark Lord—and he will use him to defeat himself.

CONFINEMENT (2/4)

Chapter Notes

> Your thoughts are, as always, greatly appreciated! I am worried that I have made Percy too unlikable. The most common sentiment I seem to get to people is some variation of "PERCY you IDIOT what are you DOING I want to SMACK YOU UPSIDE THE HEAD" which could go either way. I am quite fond of Percy but if he's too hard to root for then please let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER NINE: CONFINEMENT (2/4)

1995—1996 (Percy is 19 & 32, Severus is 34, Harry is 15, the Dark Lord is, by some accounts, 1)

“You are staring at me,” Tom snaps the next evening, interrupting the still and heavy silence that invades Percy’s flat at all times.

Percy flinches. He’d thought he was out of sight at the small table he’d wedged inside his half-kitchen, which he felt was more civilised than eating at the counter. He had been staring at Tom, watching him as he leafed through some of the volumes that Percy had painted for him. Percy left the ones behind Tom’s body blank, of course, since he had only traced their vague shapes with charcoal and not painted them explicitly, and it seems that some combination of Percy’s and Tom’s magic has materialised them into being. Tom is reading a tome that looks uncomfortable similar to the book that Malfoy lent to him, but despite Percy craning his head, he cannot see the title.

“Sorry,” Percy says hastily, turning back to his food. He’s really got to stop eating takeaway Ministry food for all meals, but he just does not have the time or energy to cook anymore. “I can move, if you’d like. Or like Snape said—we can move you to my Gringotts vault.”

“Who are you?” Tom says, after a beat, his voice marginally warmer. “I’m afraid you have me at an advantage; you know much about me, it seems, but I know very little about you.”

Percy hesitates and then brings his plate into the portion of the room he’s generously termed the main parlour, containing his couch, the portrait, a chair, and a small side table. “My name is Percy. Er, Percy Weasley. I’m two years out of Hogwarts. I discovered your diary in my sixth year. Lucius Malfoy—that’s Abraxas’ son—is enemies with my father, and he gave the diary to my younger sister as a form of revenge.”

Tom hisses sharply. “He gave a Horcrux to a child?”

Percy knows the outrage has nothing to do with the implication that a child was affected by an incredibly Dark object, but rather everything to do with the disgrace of Tom's soul being parcelled out like candy. "He does not know what it was, I believe," Percy says. It is a very odd experience to defend Lucius Malfoy.

"And his son hates your father," Tom says musingly. "Weasley. I do not know much about the Weasley family."

"There is not much to know," Percy says. With Tom he does not try to hide his resentment; if anything, he tries to make it clear, knowing it endears him to Tom. "My family is poor. They're all blood traitors, licking Dumbledore's boots."

"Dumbledore is still alive?"

Percy knows that look in Tom's eyes intimately, the way his voice is all the more dangerous for how light and casual it sounds. "He rules our society," Percy says, flicking a glance over his plate at Tom's painted form. "Nobody dares stand up to him. He claims he defeated you."

Tom smiles slowly, dangerously, the curve of his jaw reminding Percy of the languorous way the basilisk stretched its neck into the air. "He will be surprised when I return, then."

"You are taking being in a portrait rather well," Percy observes.

The smile disappears from Tom's face. "I know I am a portrait," he says, examining his painted hand. "I can feel it—the limits of my power. But I feel the Horcrux too, and the memory of what I was once. What good is it to rage and storm against what I cannot control? I *will* return—and if things are as dire as you say, I will be ready."

He is different from diary-Tom. Calmer, older, more focused. And yet the true difference is between Tom and the Dark Lord. When Snape speaks of Him he does so with reservation but not reverence. Percy had only seen the Dark Lord once or twice in those dark days toward the end—excepting, of course, the Battle of Hogwarts—and he remembers how even the sight of the Dark Lord's strange, reptilian features was enough to make Percy's stomach curl, how he magic rolled out of him in thickly moving waves that felt heavy and sticky to the touch, how erratic he was. Percy has no doubt that Tom at any age was dangerous, but the younger Toms he has interacted with are significantly more controlled.

"Can I ask a question, Tom?" Percy ventures hesitantly. "I spoke to you, well, the diary very often, you see, and you were not quite sure what you intended to do after Hogwarts, but it was so apparent that whatever it was would be incredible. But all of my research of you—and obviously I am sure you covered your tracks well—but even now—I'm just wondering—"

"Out of school, I pursued knowledge," Tom says, cutting Percy off smoothly. He leans back in his painted chair, and though there is no physical desk between them, Percy feels acutely as though he is in the office of one of his professors. "I travelled the world. I studied magic. I saw things you would never dream of, wonders and horrors so immense to even *think* of telling of them would be foolish."

Where are those things, those wonders and horrors? How had Tom found them, without a family, without a mentor, without anything except for his own drive? Percy swallows but says nothing.

“I only recently decided to return to Britain and set some of my other plans in motion,” Tom continues. “I have knowledge, all of it. What I seek now is power.”

“But why?” Percy dares to insist. “To what end? Power for nothing is not power unless wielded.”

Tom considers him thoughtfully. “I disagree.”

Percy wants to argue, but he wants Tom to trust him more, so he subsides in what he hopes is a respectful manner. “And Hogwarts? You went there to interview to be a professor.”

Tom raises an eyebrow and crosses one leg over the other. “If you found my diadem at Hogwarts, then I imagine you know why I went to Hogwarts.”

“So you never intended to work there at all.”

“I would never put myself that close to Albus Dumbledore,” hisses Tom, and the hatred twisting his face into a grimace makes him seem suddenly alive, suddenly much closer to the Dark Lord that Percy remembers. “But Hogwarts *will* be mine, one day.”

But Tom does not divulge either the locations or the particulars of the other Horcruxes. Percy makes a point to talk to him each day, though to his surprise—and, if he’s being honest, a frisson of disappointment—he does not feel that Tom enjoys talking to him very much, preferring to read whatever books his magic creates on the shelves.

He seems not to be the only one with better things to do than speak with Percy. Tonks has all but disappeared from the Ministry, and even Crouch is rarely in his office, appearing only at random intervals to request something of Percy and then disappearing. Fudge is a more reliable figure, consistently blustering in interviews and meetings alike, but Percy can only draft so many interviews before he ends up recycling all of his old material. Cedric’s letters are cheery and full of veiled references to the Defence club he is supervising interspersed with funny anecdotes about the advanced study of Herbology. Even Mathilda and Liam seem to be swept up into the social club of young government employees, meeting for pints and bites after work, though neither seem particularly inclined to invite Percy. (Percy, in a moment of weakness, points out to Liam in full earshot of the rest of the bullpen, including Mr. Crouch, that if Liam thinks that a pureblood like Mathilda is going to give Liam the time of day, he is sorely mistaken. Percy works for the next week out of Fudge’s office, embarrassed by his outburst, though he has to admit the deep flush on Liam’s face was satisfying to see, despite himself).

As October darkens into November, Cedric’s letters begin to be increasingly sparse, and he implies heavily that he is afraid that Umbridge is monitoring the post. Percy privately doubts this; whenever *he* hears from Umbridge, it rather seems like she’s barely able to keep her hand on the school, Special Decrees notwithstanding. It would take a more skilled witch than

she to meddle with the Hogwarts owls, and Percy cannot imagine she has the time to personally read everyone's correspondence.

But he defers to Cedric's paranoia, and the next time he has a letter for Cedric, explaining in *explicit* detail why shield wards are better than shield charms, though of course an understanding of the latter is a prerequisite for the former, he goes to Priscilla Diggory for help in smuggling the letter. Percy cannot imagine asking one of his classmates to send him post via his mother, but he supposes that Cedric has a rather different relationship to Priscilla than Percy does to Molly, whose silence grows icier every day.

"It's a good precaution," Priscilla compliments him, forestalling the long and complex excuse Percy had prepared to explain why he could not simply mail Cedric himself. "I'll slip the letter in a care package I'm sending Cedric. The bastards won't find it."

"Cedric believes packages are being searched as well, Madam Diggory," Percy says cautiously. While Percy can justify writing to Cedric, given Cedric's apparent neutrality and interest in magical study, Percy does not think he can explain concealing a letter in a package.

She scoffs at him. "I married Amos against the express wishes of my family; I know perfectly well how to hide a letter to a man."

"Well, I thank you, Madam Diggory," replies Percy, discomfited. He glances around him, looking for something else to say. Her new house is impeccably clean, nothing like the gentle clutter that Percy vaguely remembers from the Diggory residence. He can't help but notice the fireplace in the kitchen has been bricked up, and he drags his gaze away from it uncomfortably.

Priscilla pins Percy under a beady glare. "Are you trustworthy?"

Percy coughs and hopes his ears are not tinged red. "I believe so."

"I told your Mr. Crouch that I think someone murdered Amos, and all he did was warn me against spreading dangerous rumours," says Priscilla disdainfully, flicking her wand savagely to clean the small ring of water left on the saucer from her teacup.

Percy blinks and does the same to his, though with a gentler gesture. "Er, Madam Diggory, I would caution the same," he says delicately. "I would agree with you that the circumstances of Mr. Diggory's death were less than innocent, but to make accusations without a suspect—"

"It was either the bloody goblins, or Lucius Malfoy," breaks in Priscilla. "Or both, working together."

Percy resolves to get and find a time to chat with Bill despite himself, for the tale that Priscilla tells paints a chilling picture. Amos had been very close to having a final version signed of an amendment to the 1301 Goblin Neutrality treaty, which all but guarantees the support of the goblins to whichever wizarding party controls the Ministry under the guise of neutrality. Such a treaty would have in theory aligned the Ministry with the goblins, which was in theory a powerful tool, if it weren't for the fact that the Ministry could fall to the Death

Eaters at any time. An amendment would have forced the goblins to disavow any “traitorous” groups to the societal order of peace.

Percy hadn't heard of this amendment passing in the previous timeline, though he doubts it would have amounted to much in the end. Whichever party controls the Ministry controls the narrative and presumably would mark the opposition as traitorous, regardless of what the truth may be. Still, it is precisely the type of optimistic nonsense that the Light Side seems to purport, all about idealism without any consideration of cold, bleak reality.

"But why would a goblin murder Mr. Diggory?"

"Not all of them agreed with the amendment," explains Priscilla darkly. "The creatures are not uniform; Amos knew that well. He was picking up on very worrisome signs indeed. I am liable to believe that Harry Potter; why else would there be so much hullabaloo with the goblins and the centaurs and the giants and Merlin knows what else? Amos was working indecent hours trying to pin down the movements of each sect."

Percy wonders if that was why Amos had looked at him so suspiciously, trying to gather information on the same. "And Lord Malfoy?"

"Well, he's a champion of yours, I hear, so I shan't say anything, I suppose," says Priscilla, her tight face showing clearly what she thinks of the idea. "But he'd have a lot of money to lose in an upcoming war if the goblins don't support Death Eaters, hmm?"

Percy frowns and points out, "But any of the Death Eaters could likely say the same."

"But Lucius was *very* interested in the bill," she says ominously. "More so than even Barty. He was always lurking around Gringotts when Amos was there."

Lucius Malfoy is as convincing of an enemy as any, Percy supposes, reading through his history books that evening for more information on the goblin treaties. But if the amendment that Amos wanted to pass had gone into force, if anything it would be good for the Death Eaters, no? To have the goblins bound to help the Ministry rather than remain neutral? Then he who controlled the Ministry controlled the goblins, and therefore the money.

Perhaps he will need to speak to Bill, although after Percy's last curt letter, he's not so sure Bill will write back.

***

Dear Percy,

Mum tells me that you’re avoiding them, that you’re hanging out with Malfoy and his lot. I know this must be a hard time for you; recently graduated, trying to make your mark in the world. But you ought to know that nothing is more important than family, right? And if what Harry says is true, family will become more important than ever.

I do not know much about the amendment; Diggory may have thought it was close to passing, but I'm not so sure, to be honest. Once you learn a bit more about how the goblins interact, you'll see that this amendment wouldn't change any of their behaviour anyway. They always claim neutrality, even as they ally themselves with the strongest punitive power, since the Treaty of 602 forbids goblins from harming a magical being directly. I suppose if the amendment did pass, the goblins would be bound to refuse Death Eaters access to their vaults if they were convicted. It's hard to say. The goblins are definitely aware that something is going on, and they've closed ranks even more now that Diggory's been allegedly murdered.

Shall we meet next week? I have someone I'd like you to meet. I think you already met her, actually, but (don't tell Mum!) we're actually going rather steady. Do you remember Fleur from the Tournament?

Love,

Bill

***

("Weasley—would you say your mother is a surrogate mother for Potter?"

"I'm sorry?"

"If she could see reason, do you think she could *control* the boy?"

"Minister, my mother cannot even control her own sons; I don't think she has much say over what Potter does either."

"And what of your older brothers? William and Charles? Are they Dumbledore's as well?"

"I do not believe either Bill or Charlie ever met Dumbledore; they've both been out of the country, though Bill now works at Gringotts. Neither of them are particularly fond of Potter either. They've got more sense than the rest of them.")

***

Dear Bill,

You ought to be more careful with what you say and who you say it to.

Thank you. Best of wishes to you and Fleur. Perhaps we can meet closer to the holidays.

Percy

***

November 1995

Bill's response is somehow even more condescending than the first, and Tom watches in some amusement as Percy lights it on fire with a furious flick of his wrist. He seethes throughout the first half of his day, though of course his face is bland and interested as Fudge authorises Umbridge with yet more power over Hogwarts—Percy wonders if Fudge can see that Umbridge is clearly angling to decree herself into the Minister's office, but then irritatedly decides he does not care if Fudge wishes to cast his own grave-digging charm—and then when he finds Tonks' office empty at lunch again, he struggles to prevent himself from lighting anything else on fire, too.

Hermes finds him after the lunch hour, interrupting his desultory effort to reply to all of the correspondence that Crouch seems to find it acceptable to ignore. (Percy wonders if Crouch was always like this, arrogant enough to maintain control over an entire department without doing a single minute of work, or whether this behaviour is because the man now has a burgeoning war to command his attention). This letter is from Snape, and Percy puzzles over it for a few seconds.

Insultingly, Snape has sent a recipe containing Percy's proposed changes to Pepperup that manages to contain a cipher requiring *considerable* knowledge of Arithmancy to decipher, while remaining an entirely valid and honestly rather brilliant recipe variation of which Percy is deeply envious. Even the old scholarly joy of finally uncovering the correct answer does little to correct the black mood that seems to hover so persistently over Percy these days. The deciphered recipe confirms that the Dark Lord is now in the lake of narcissus, which Percy takes to mean Malfoy Manor.

Absently, Percy burns this letter as well, though with significantly less rage than he'd destroyed Bill's. Narcissa has not written to him in many days. Percy does not write either. The mild bond of their association cannot withstand a Dark Lord in her sitting room. Nevertheless, he feels a spark of worry for her, that lovely woman, forced to entertain the Darkest wizard of their time.

Unable to concentrate, Percy takes an extended break to walk by his father's department. Percy had never visited Arthur in the hospital in the first timeline, to his everlasting shame, but he knows the broad strokes of it: his father, in hospital, struggling to survive, harmed on some futile errand for the Order.

In this timeline, Percy may not be able to prevent his father from working late or running errands for Dumbledore, but he makes it a habit to check on Arthur, to Disillusion himself

and walk by his father every time he needs to step away from his desk, to renew his monitoring charms as needed.

Today, when he lingers invisibly in the doorway, his father looks up as if sensing his presence despite the Disillusionment charm. Arthur seems older than Percy remembers, and Percy watches as his father rubs absently at his temples with long, slender fingers. Percy has to swallow back the urge to announce himself, casting a quiet charm on Arthur as he turns back to his desk, and then seeing himself out.

He begs off work shortly after, claiming a headache, and Apparates to Little Hangleton instead of his empty, draughty little flat. Little Hangleton is cold, and the sky is grey and cloudy. Percy shivers and casts a small warming charm.

He wishes he could have taken Tonks or Charlie, both for company and because he has a vague plan of chatting up some locals in a bar, but both of them are, of course, unavailable, though he supposes Charlie has the excuse that he's out of the country. Percy arrives alone with a quiet pop in the corner of the graveyard, looking around him with interest.

Whatever dark and dangerous ritual was performed here last June left no trace, save for perhaps some mud at Tom Riddle Sr.'s grave. Percy makes a note nevertheless and then turns to look at the great, quiet manor house hovering forebodingly on the opposite hill.

He has at least an hour or two of light, and so he steels himself, transforms into a lynx, and creeps up to the front door, feeling a slight rush of exhilaration as his mind snaps into focus.

It's open, oddly enough, and he feels his ears flatten against his head at the thought. All it must mean is that the local townspeople went sleuthing, he tells himself. Likely all he'll find are teenagers causing trouble.

He creeps in. What he smells first, of course, is blood—but dried blood, old blood, blood that his lynx nose has no real interest in nor aversion to. He follows the trail of blood into a large, draughty living room, with a grated fireplace. Sniffing around the fireplace he notes there is ash, but he is no expert, even as a lynx, in deducing how old the ash may be.

One thing does stall him; coiled in the corner of the room is a large discarded snakeskin, eerily intact. It reminds him of the basilisk, twisted and eerily translucent in the dark halls of the chamber. Percy sniffs cautiously at it and then transforms back long enough to cut a piece of it to examine later. He has an uncomfortable feeling that he knows precisely what snake shed this skin.

The rest of the Manor, as far as he can see, has not been disturbed for many years. A thick layer of dust lays protectively around the various surfaces; not even the doorknobs have been disturbed. It seems that even the local youth avoid the place, if they can even see it at all. Percy does not sense any active wards but perhaps there are some too subtle to be immediately identified.

The house is large and grand. Dozens of still Muggle portraits line the halls, and in some of the rooms Percy noses into, silver shields and swords and jewellery are laid out enticingly. Perhaps they are cursed. No, he cannot imagine Muggles entering the Manor and leaving

these goods untouched. Whether a spell or merely their own intuition, something is warning those Muggles to stay far away.

Percy transforms again once he's back in the room with the snake skin. He casts a few preliminary spells to ensure what he already knows: he's alone in the house. Then he begins to go through his impressive arsenal of detection spells. As McGonagall once mentioned years ago, there is no real way to scry for a specific object, but there are certainly other ways to deduce if magic has been cast, if an object is leaking magic into the air, if something has defensive wards around it, and so on. Percy has made it his mission to become proficient in all of these spells, and by the time he lowers his wand again, he can be certain that the only magical thing in the house is himself—and the skin.

For the snake skin glows faintly with what Percy would guess is the Dark Lord's magical signature, though of course without viewing it himself he cannot be sure. The Dark Lord cast what seems like several protective spells on the snake, or so the residue left on the skin would suggest. Percy has a few terrifying memories of the snake gliding serenely next to its master, all of which make him shudder. Though, of course, Neville Longbottom does kill it with a clean slice of Gryffindor's sword, so the snake clearly is not invulnerable.

It's weird to think of Voldemort having a *pet*. Perhaps he uses the snake for venom or as a weapon to attack. It is almost *sentimental* to imagine Voldemort casting protection spells on his snake, though of course Tom would likely say that he was just protecting a valuable asset.

Percy shakes his head and transforms back into a lynx. With each transformation it becomes easier, and he requires less time to get used to the jarring difference in height or the way his senses adapt to his form. The best part about being a lynx is how far he can travel without tiring. He makes it all the way down to the village without even his breath changing into pants.

Percy finds an unobtrusive place to change back into human and then looks around for the most likely place to find a Muggle who may tell him about Tom Riddle.

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As it turns out, the Muggles have quite a lot to say about Tom Riddle, and Percy barely has to deploy the little charm he has in his arsenal to get the information. The Riddles have ruled over this portion of the land for years, formally and informally, employing generations of the townspeople as servants and gardeners and drivers. The general sentiment is that they were a bit haughty and not very likeable, though the last set of them—Tom's father—were worse than the rest. Tom shocked the town by impregnating the poor Gaunt girl and then discarding her with claims that she tricked him into marriage.

"The *poor* Gaunt girl?" Percy interjects at this point, trying not to shudder as the tipsy Muggle next to him leans in a little too close to his breathing space. "What do you mean,

poor?”

He’s accumulated three or four interested Muggles, all men, who seem content to tell him what they know as long as he continues paying for the drinks with Muggle money he had pilfered from the Library of Archives.

One of them, the one currently inserting himself far too close to Percy, gives something like a belch and takes a draw from his tankard. Percy shudders delicately at the smell of the stale beer, wafting over them. Muggle beer is no more appetizing to him than wizarding beer, not that he would have expected otherwise. In fact, the whole town is a bit grimy; the Hog's Head would not look out place here. He will have to shower thoroughly when he is home. “Poor as a penny farthing,” he confirms. “Their whole family lived in a shack—Mr. Gaunt and his two mad children.”

“They were mad,” interjects another man, this one with scraggly red hair. “Or at least the brother was. The girl never said much.”

“And Riddle married her?”

Shrugs all around. “She always claimed they were married, but he denied it,” says the first man. “My ma reckoned he was just playin’ around, sowing his wild oats and all that, and then she got pregnant and he ran.”

“Can’t have a claim to the Riddle name out there, can he,” says the red-haired man wisely. “Course, he never married again. For years Riddle said the Gaunt girl was a witch and she’d hexed him—but truth is, none of our girls would have him, not after what he did to her.”

“So the name died out,” Percy says musingly.

What they tell him next is clearly intended to be even more shocking than the revelation that the ancient heirs of Gaunt were apparently paupers living in squalor: the bastard son grew up to murder the parents in a mysterious double murder with no traces save—

—"The terror in their eyes," completes the belcher, widening his own eyes to illustrate. “The matron at the Wool’s went mad, you know. Always said she knew young Tom Riddle would grow up to be a murderer.”

“Is Wool’s an orphanage?” Percy asks, alert.

The third man, silent till now, glances around him and then lowers his voice. “Used to be in London, but the building was destroyed in the war. Bombing, I think. The matron moved here, for some reason. It was quite the shock to her to learn this was where Riddle’s son was from. Died a few years later, God rest her soul.”

Percy frowns at this revelation. He supposes that the orphanage could feasibly have been destroyed during the Muggle war, though he has a suspicion Tom had more to do with that than the Muggles. But why would the matron of the orphanage move, implausibly, to *Little Hangleton?* Had Tom somehow implanted the idea in her head?

Muggle minds are weak. Perhaps she had learned of Tom's origins and fixated on the idea. Apparently the woman had gone mad. Percy supposes it does not *really* matter, but it is odd, and something about the idea of it makes him feel a little queasy. He clears his throat and says, to distract both him and the men from the matron, "Is the orphanage still open?"

The second man shakes his bushy head. "Closed down when she moved. Apparently she'd been funding it with her own money, the poor bugger."

"Is there anyone who may have been at the orphanage when Tom was?"

The third man speaks quieter still. "Nobody who'd admit it, but I doubt it. Not too many strangers around these parts."

Percy decides soon after he's had enough of Muggles and, after a very long and hot shower, he settles down in front of Tom. Tom has never spoken to him about his family, but Percy needs to know, needs to at least understand where Tom grew up. He has a hunch that Tom hid a Horcrux in the orphanage. He would have, if he were Tom.

"I went to Riddle Manor today," he says.

Tom, who had been standing with his back to Percy, browsing his bookshelf, whirls on Percy, the tips of his robes flaring. (Percy admires it, as he does whenever his portrait does something impressive). "How dare you," he hisses, doing the now-familiar gesture wherein he plunges his hand into his robes for his wand. Percy has not seen him do any wandless magic, luckily.

"The Dark Lord hid there for many months prior to the resurrection," Percy says. "I had to investigate."

"You *dare*," Tom continues, leaning as close as he can to glare down Percy. "You *dare*."

But Tom can't do anything to Percy. He can't even leave his frame. Horcrux or no, he's trapped in the canvas, and that makes Percy bold. "Tom, I'm doing the best I can, but you know we need the Horcruxes to bring you back," he insists. "We've spoken of the theory. The diadem that trapped you was broken, nearly burned to a crisp by Fiendfyre. This was the only way I could think to save you. I do not know how to extract you from the painting without the Horcruxes."

Tom's smile turns unpleasant. "Why don't you paint yourself in here with me?"

Percy smiles thinly and ignores Tom's suggestion. He's not scared of this painted Dark Lord. "You need to trust me, Tom. I made you a vow, and I'm risking everything to help you."

"I need to do nothing," says Tom. "Return me to *Him*."

"He's liable to destroy you," Percy exclaims. "He's mad, Tom. We can all see it. He's killing his followers on a whim, He's obsessed with Harry Potter, and He refuses to even leave Malfoy Manor."

“With Abraxas?” Tom asks, and Percy knows he is not imagining the way Tom's eyes widen, just slightly. It is so strange to sit here and converse with this not-Tom, a Tom that Percy actually knows quite a bit about, who is nevertheless an entirely different person than diary-Tom, sixteen years old.

“He killed Abraxas, Tom,” Percy lies easily, instinctively, though he knows perfectly well Abraxas Malfoy died of Dragon Pox not too long after Draco was born. “Murdered him and his wife right before their son’s eyes when they failed him at a task.”

Tom narrows his eyes at Percy. “I can tell when you’re lying, you know.”

“I’m not lying,” Percy insists. “I swear to you.”

“I am made from Ravenclaw’s diadem, Weasley,” says Tom coolly. “I know when you are lying. What I would like to know is *why*.”

Tom may know he is lying—but what of his other claims? Percy tends to err on the side of truth, but surely he has lied to Tom before.

He will have to be careful, like siphoning small bits of glass from a broken glass without losing control of the spell. Half truths, partial truths, lies of omission. He sighs and deflates, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Well, he didn’t kill Lady Malfoy,” he says truthfully. “But Abraxas is long dead.”

True, all true. Tom eyes him carefully and then nods, as if whatever magic the diadem affords him confirmed what Percy was saying.

“What did you find at Riddle Manor?”

Percy digs for the bit of snake skin and holds it close to the portrait. “Only this, my Lord. The Muggles are terrified of you—they speak of the murder of your parents with whispers.”

Well, *whispers* is pressing it, but Tom’s lie detector does not seem to register the exaggeration. “Snake skin,” he says thoughtfully. “I always planned to obtain a snake.”

“As a pet?”

Tom’s gaze sears even across the boundary of paint. “As a weapon.”

“Tom, I believe you would have hidden a Horcrux at the orphanage,” Percy presses. “But the orphanage has been torn down.”

Tom looks at Percy for a very long time. “I told you much,” he says finally, and some of the aggression bleeds from him, until he is merely a young man with regal features.

Percy quirks his lips. He is trying to take every opportunity to tell of their shared bond, to remind Tom that he was his only friend when he was merely a memory encased in a diary. “You told me that you hated it,” he says softly. “That you hoped we would raze it one day to the ground. They did not let you stay at Hogwarts, though the Muggles could have bombed you in their sleep.”

Tom paces across the painting. It does not take a mind-reader to know that Percy knows of his weaknesses, his past. Percy clears his throat and continues.

“I grew up in a hovel,” he says. “I often hated it. It’s small and crowded and much too loud, and nobody in my family seemed to ever notice I was there.”

Tom sniffs derisively. Percy’s pauper upbringing, his sniff says, is not deserving of Tom’s notice.

But sixteen year old Tom enjoyed hearing stories of Percy’s misfortunes, and so Percy continues. “My father is a Muggle loving fool, and my mother an old and fat housewife. You promised me one day that you would help me burn it to the ground and watch them run.”

Well, Tom *did* promise that, though Percy has no intention of taking him up on the offer.

When Tom meets Percy’s gaze again there is humour in the slight curve of his lips. Percy risks one final entreaty. “Tom, I need you back,” he says, desperately, truthfully. “I know we may never be friends like we once were, that you are older and wiser and do not need a nineteen year old wizard with an embarrassing last name, but I need you, Tom. I’ll follow you in whatever way you want me to."

"Poor Percy," says Tom, mockingly. "No money and no friends. No accomplishments of your own, either."

Percy bristles. "I brought you here, did I not?"

"Funny," Tom comments. "I rather thought that was Severus Snape's doing."

"It was *my* doing." Percy rises to his feet, and in his full height he towers over the painting. "*I* brought you back, Tom. You told *me* about your past—and *only* me."

Tom watches Percy steadily. "So I did, but I fail to see why."

"I cast my first Imperius when I was sixteen. I helped you command the basilisk; I discovered the truth about your Horcruxes. You may use me, Tom, but *do not dismiss me*."

Percy falls silent, his ears beginning to burn. There is something about Tom that coaxes his insecurities to the surface, the ugly truths he can admit to no one else.

"You are nothing beside me," Tom says softly, almost lovingly. "Rage, little Weasley, for when I have returned you will bow at my feet."

It takes everything inside Percy to not rip the painting from the wall, wipe that condescending smirk off Tom's face with thinner. Instead he takes a steadying breath and drops to his knees. "I will bow now," he whispers. "But I need you alive, Tom. *Please."*

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Later, after a very hot shower, Percy lays in his bed, staring up at the ceiling, and feeling rather useless.

He can barely remember what it felt like at Hogwarts, the first time, so anxious and eager to prove himself. Even the memories of Hogwarts, the second time—learning the Animagus transformation, practising his magic, forcing himself through years of Potion tutelage, deciphering the Map and then making his own Map—seem hollow and inadequate. Only small feats of magic, hardly anything to leave as his legacy, and all within the reach of a normal wizard with some ambition.

Percy had found the diary, and then he'd promptly lost it. He'd been to the Chamber of Secrets and tangled with the basilisk, but only under Tom's command. He'd spoken to the ghost of Ravenclaw herself and the Bloody Baron aside, but all of those were for Tom, in the search of Tom, in the quest to destroy Tom.

What has *he* done?

Even painting had become a skill he developed just for Tom and not for himself. Even the portrait he made of his father had been practice for the real thing. His love of Transfiguration, his knowledge of Potions, his drive to perfect wandless and wordless magic—all for Tom, all of it, nothing for him.

The last project he can recall working on for his own interest and his own interest only had been the bloody Marauder's Map. Percy *can* remember the rush of exaltation he'd felt, that first time, forcing the Map to give up its secrets, untangling the complex web of spells across the deceptively ratty surface.

That had been the first time he'd learned about a magical anchor, of a transformative force, of the intersection of Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, and Charms.

Percy sighs and turns over, but the left side of his room holds no additional answers that his ceiling lacked.

Well, he'd sent himself back in time to destroy Tom. Not for himself, not for his legacy, but to atone for his wrongs and ensure his family lived.

He'd thought that Tom would help him with his Horcrux search more, but of course, why would Tom want to help Percy find the most vulnerable shards of his soul? Percy had been an idiot to think Tom would spring into the portrait, full of energy and snarky wit and helpful suggestions, even if *his* Tom had been an ally more often than he'd been an enemy.

So. Percy cannot rely on Tom. He cannot rely on anyone, which is a familiar feeling, and not one more pleasant for its familiarity. *First steps first,* he tells himself, though the old refrain has lost some of its efficacy. But still, it's all logic, isn't it? And Percy is a logical wizard, isn't he? Nobody can take that away from him. (Can they?)

He needs to find Tom's orphanage. His gut tells him that Tom would have hidden a Horcrux at the orphanage. He knows it's in London, but it's been destroyed, so there's no point at all in searching all of these nasty little buildings for signs of Tom.

Logic. Something is beating against Percy's brain, but he can't seem to let it in. He squeezes his eyes shut as he tries to untangle the mess in his mind.

Tom was in the orphanage when Dumbledore found him. So Dumbledore would know where the orphanage is, but of course Percy can't ask Dumbledore. Does anyone else know? Perhaps his Head of House—Slughorn, Percy supposes. But why would Slughorn remember anything other than that Tom grew up in an orphanage in London?

He needs an address, something more specific to guide his search. How can he find the address of the orphanage?

Unbidden, the ghost of James Potter's laughter floats through his mind, and Percy sits up straight, clutching handfuls of his crisp white sheets in both hands.

Every Hogwarts student receives a letter on their eleventh birthday, addressed to their residence, in excruciating detail.

Percy Weasley

The Burrow

Fourth Bedroom From the Top

Left Side

Anything can be an anchor of anything, he remembers, and he falls back into bed, a warm burst of energy in his chest.

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December 1995

Tom, clearly, enjoys playing with Percy. Percy tries to indulge it as much as possible (and tries to keep his temper while doing so), but he cannot help but wonder if Tom has any intention at all of helping him. He will need to fetch the modified Map from Snape to test his hypothesis that he will be able to use it to fetch Tom Riddle's address from the registry, but his preliminary trials are going well. The registry has magic to track each wizard's present location, but Percy believes he can force the registry to give him its history, too. Otherwise there's *got* to be something that McGonagall or Snape has access to that would help him determine where, exactly, the orphanage may have been, all those years ago. Right? Snape is a Head of House; he ought to know.

Percy exhales in irritation and looks around him. He's at the Ministry later than usual; Tom's knowing smirk has been more difficult to deal with of late. From the looks of the other occupants in the elevator, he's not the only one avoiding some personal responsibility by burying it with the professional. His nose wrinkles delicately; at least Percy makes time for regular hygiene charms, even if he does sometimes run out of time to take an actual shower.

Percy hates Ministry elevators; they're always too cramped, have a tendency to shoot in jarring directions, and often one must endure the entire ride listening to some bureaucrat complain about bureaucracy, as if he is being personally slighted by an organisation with rigid rules.

This elevator is no different. Percy groans to himself when he sees the mottled green and brown robes of the magical creatures division—they're on the South Wing, and he needs to be on the East, meaning they will make an entirely unnecessary detour that involves, if he remembers correctly from his research into werewolves, at least one sickening drop.

"It was too late by the time we got there," one of them, a tall stocky sort of woman with tightly pinned black hair, tells her colleague.

He shakes his head. "I know we're not saying the *word*," he says, lowering his voice, "But it smacks of *them*. Who else would know to go to the Gurg to present the gifts?"

They're speaking of giants, Percy realises in a flash. He knows the word Gurg: the leader of the giants, as he'd explained in his paper to Crouch. More importantly, they're speaking of the Ministry effort to win allies among the giants.

The woman sighs, twisting her finger in the lapel of her robes. "Bloody shame, really," she sighs. "At least the pack may still come around."

"Not likely," her partner says. "Without the potion, we've not got a bargaining chip."

"You think they'll think to give the potion?"

"That's what I'm afraid of," he says grimly, before the sickening screech of the elevator dropping five floors in rapid succession makes conversation briefly impossible.

Percy collects himself from where he'd fallen into the railing and watches as the two make their way out of the elevator.

The latter exchange *had* to be about the werewolves—but Percy had specifically included in his report that the Ministry needed to provide the Wolfsbane potion, otherwise they'd have nothing with which to negotiate. Had his work all been for naught?

And why had he had to compile that report, anyway? Percy begins to make his way out of the elevator, thank Merlin, and toward Crouch's office, his mind roving over the conversation, picking it apart as if it were a difficult exam question or Dark ritual to study. Amos Diggory himself had watched him compile a set of reports on creatures under his purview, to take to Crouch. Percy had been flattered at the time, but of course if the Ministry wanted to approach the giants or the werewolves, not to mention the hinkypunks or the centaurs, they would

commission a report first from the Department of Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, not the Department of International Magical Cooperation. Werewolves and giants, goblins and centaurs, all have creature-status, not being-status. Perhaps Crouch did not trust Diggory, or wanted to keep his interest private?

Percy is still thinking about it when he opens the door to Crouch's office. At times, the various Departments in the Ministry infringe on each other's territory. Quite often, in fact. It would not be so out of place for Crouch to task his clerk with finding information about a subject he finds interesting. For all Percy knows, some foreign head would want information on the werewolf populations of Britain, and Crouch felt it most expedient to ask Percy to do his dirty work.

Except, Percy had done that research, and Amos Diggory had died.

"Ah, Mr. Weasley," Crouch says, not bothering to rise from his perch behind his desk. "You're late."

"My apologies, sir," Percy says automatically. "I had an errant elevator."

Crouch chuckles self-importantly. Clearly he's feeling better today; likely he just dosed on one of the many stimulants that he seems to keep on his person at all times. "Bloody things. More trouble than they're worth."

Percy gives Crouch a sideways glance and then decides to just *ask*. They're on the same side, after all, and Crouch's magic feels clean when Percy extends his awareness tentatively. "Sir, in the elevator, I heard something...odd."

"Odd how?" Crouch sits up slightly.

"I heard that the Ministry has not been authorised to give Wolfsbane to the werewolves," Percy says slowly and carefully. "But in the report you had me compile, I'd outlined that as a necessary prerequisite for gaining their trust."

Crouch gives himself a private smile, turning his wand slowly over in his hands. "And I daresay it was."

"In fact, it sounds like the Death Eaters may be trying the same approach," Percy continues carefully. "I think we ought to revisit this, Mr. Crouch. Our window to act is closing swiftly."

"On the contrary, Mr. Weasley, our window to act has already closed. Full marks for effort, though."

What—

—Percy lashes out with his magic, but Crouch is not under the Imperius, does not seem cursed at all—

—a few things wiggle loose in his brain and collide, and Percy looks up in betrayal at Crouch. "You never intended to act, did you," he accuses. "You didn't want the Ministry to gain creature allies."

Crouch smirks. “Well, that part is true,” he concedes. “But I always intended to act, Mr. Weasley.”

A pause. Percy swallows. His mouth goes dry. “You’re working for them, aren’t you,” Percy accuses, fumbling for his own wand. It’s completely unbelievable—utterly absurd—but it does make a few things make rather more sense. He begins to back away slowly, toward the still open door. “Mr. Crouch—”

“Please,” Crouch says, waving his wand lazily in the air. The door slams shut. “Mr. Crouch was my father."

For a prolonged second, all Percy can do is stare, nonplussed, at Crouch.

And then he shakes his head, because while he is not a two-time Hogwarts graduate for nothing, he can hardly believe what his intuition is telling him. The Map, of course, the Map does not lie, and Bartemius Crouch did indeed spend much of the Tournament wandering the grounds. But at the same time—“You’re dead.”

Barty Crouch Jr. spreads his hands and bows. “That was a clever deduction, Mr. Weasley. Quick, too. I was right about you.”

“You died in Azkaban.”

“My mother died in Azkaban, and she deserved it, too,” Barty says nastily. “One alive and one dying person in, and one alive and one dying person out.”

Percy shakes his head again, as if his denial will erase the truth. He would have noticed; he should have noticed. Had this happened last time? Had it always been his fate to work under a Death Eater and a murderer and notice absolutely nothing? Oh, Merlin. Oh, *Merlin.* His forehead is damp, and he realises with a start that his toes are curling in his shoes as he struggles to keep his voice even. “And Bertha Jorkins, she discovered you.”

“It really is a pleasure to work with someone so bright,” Barty says. “He needed an innocent, you know. Please, sit.”

Percy sits, though he keeps his wand out. This *must* have happened last time, too—but Barty Crouch Jr. must have done something differently to cause his death, or perhaps his father’s death. Maybe he made a small mistake and garnered too much attention. Maybe Crouch Sr. had fought back. Polyjuice, not stimulants. Percy really is an idiot. Cedric had even suggested Polyjuice; Percy had even had the thought that Polyjuice would be undetectable, given as it is not classified as a Dark spell. So many hints, and for Percy to be blind, blind, blind. *Oh, Merlin.* “You—you did not choose Imperius?”

Crouch shook his head. “I considered it,” he admitted. “But a *true* Imperius, an *absolute* Imperius—it’s difficult magic, you know, and my father *is* rather willful. Better to keep him locked up. I’ve enough hair for years.” He smirks at Percy, the expression out of place on Crouch’s tired, lined face. “You gave me the idea, you know.”

“I—what?”

“I was at the World Cup, that day,” the man explains, twisting his father’s face into a bright, crazed mask. “Under an Invisibility Cloak. Winky argued for me, you know. She told my father I deserved a break, that I was good. But little did he know, I was ready to fight.”

Percy resists the urge to wipe his forehead. Oh, he can see it all clearly now. “You cast the *Morsmordre.*”

Barty nods readily, like a schoolboy eager for recognition, and Percy’s stomach gives a sickening lurch. “I saw the wand… *his* wand…Harry Potter’s wand…and I took it. But I thought it was all over; you were there, and my fool of a father, and Diggory too. They found Winky. I was ready to be caught, and it would have been worth it, to help my master one last time…and then I heard you say that there was no Trace on the *Morsmordre,* that if I had walked away, nobody would have found me.”

“And that led you to Polyjuicing your father?” Percy asks weakly, fighting down the urge to cry, or maybe to throw up. He’d just been trying to point out the oddity of the situation, but he hadn’t thought anyone would take his words as inspiration.

Barty nods again. “I thought to myself…what other spells are not on the Ministry Trace? What other gaps could I exploit? I researched it when I could…I Imperiused my father once or twice, but it was difficult, he fought back…and then I thought, magic is difficult, without my own wand. It’s difficult to control. Dark magic is magic of the will, you know, and while I had plenty of will, I was weak, too weak, from years of my father Imperiusing me…”

Percy cannot help the horror in his tone. “Your own father Imperiused you?”

“For years, he kept me in a chain of my own thoughts, of his commands,” Barty barks out, his teeth bared in a savage expression of anger. “I was weak, too weak…but I was always good at Potions, in Hogwarts. I learned that many potions were not traceable, and I thought, why not take my father’s place?”

“You will stay like this for years?” Percy indicates all of it, the empty and dusty office, Crouch’s old and lined body.

“Not hardly,” Crouch huffs out, and he suddenly sounds more like himself. Indeed, as Percy watches, he sees his boss transform into a younger version of himself, with a shock of dark hair instead of grey and a bright madness in his eyes. Percy wonders if he’d always intended to reveal himself, or if he would have taken the next Polyjuice dose if Percy had not said anything. To take constant Polyjuice doses, for years…it was suicide. It would end Crouch’s life early, both of them. Every dose of Polyjuice takes some of the drinker’s life-force, necessary to power the transformation, which was why it was such a restricted substance. Why would Barty *do* that? “Soon. Very soon, and I’ll be free to reveal myself.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Percy asks abruptly. Yes, he’d questioned the Wolfsbane, but his curiosity had hardly been so damning that Crouch could not have deflected him.

Barty smiles at Percy conspiratorially. “I know your secret,” he whispers in a sing-song voice. Percy tenses, and Barty laughs delightedly. “Oh yes, Weasley. I saw you when your

father was here. You hate him. You hate them all, don't you? They've dismissed you, forgotten you even, and you *hate them for it*."

Percy is about to protest but then he sits back in his chair, lowering his wand to show he is not planning on attacking. It's just like Tom, at the end of the day, and hadn't this been his plan anyway? Show just enough dissatisfaction with his family to keep courting allies like Malfoy and Umbridge without completely severing his ties with Tonks or Moody? Crouch—Sr—he'd classified somewhere in between, a Light wizard who was nevertheless a cruel and haughty pureblood heir.

"I do hate them," he whispers, and he bows his head as if he's ashamed. He is ashamed, he supposes, but not for the reasons that Crouch may think.

"They're all so *old* and *stupid*, aren't they," Barty continues, twirling the wand with increasing speed. "My father, your father, all of the Old Guard. Each side had a chance, twenty years ago, to remake the world in their image...and each side failed utterly. But we won't fail, Weasley. We've been watching, haven't we? And we know where they went wrong."

Percy does not actually disagree with this, thinking of Dumbledore and the Dark Lord, even of Snape and McGonagall. It took seventeen year old Harry Potter to save the day, and he did so by some combination of luck, loyalty, and sheer nerve. Once the Dark Lord fell, it had been relatively easy to establish peace. The Dark Lord had left no sort of continuity plan, and in his arrogance had summoned his entire fleet to the Battle of Hogwarts, trapping them with the same anti-Apparation spell that held the students in. Once the Aurors had arrived, it took merely hours to process all of the Death Eaters, and only weeks to establish a protocol for trials.

A younger Tom, perhaps, would have seen the shortfalls in the Dark Lord's plan, just as a younger Dumbledore may have been able to prevent significant casualties by confiding in someone other than Harry Potter. For all of Lucius Malfoy's money, for Moody's military genius, for his own parents' social influence among the light—neither side acted *logically*, as if they had their long term success in mind. Where had been the Order's system of safehouses or portkeys or duelling training? Why had they been utterly unable to save the dozens if not hundreds of Muggleborn wizards and witches condemned to death or Azkaban merely by secreting them away? How had the Ministry fallen so swiftly?

Percy looks up to see Barty watching his face carefully. The man barks a short laugh, and leans over the desk to extend his hand to Percy. "You're one of us," he says exultantly. "You told me of that boy's Mudblood heritage—you've been helping Umbridge with her strategy to oust Dumbledore—and I've heard you've been building quite the nest of connections with Malfoy, Greengrass, and who knows who else."

His reports, meticulously researched, with headings and footnotes and citations, are being used by the *Death Eaters*. His pathetic attempts to be *noble*, to help the *government*, to change this timeline in a *positive* way—Percy imagines Voldemort's scaly hand reaching for one of his carefully lettered pages and wants to cry.

But he cannot cry. He is here, completely alone, facing a mad disciple, and if he does not believe Percy is *one of them*, then Percy very well could die. As usual, the urgency snaps Percy out of his panic, and he only has to swallow, once, before he can respond.

"I do not know what being one of you means," says Percy carefully, evaluating Barty before he reaches out and shakes his hand. He has to remember that the strategy is simple. It's as Barty said: he's already playing his hand for the Death Eaters, and that will at least keep him alive until he can take them down. "But I am certainly not one of *them*."

"I'll introduce you to the rest of us, soon," Barty promises. "Course, not many know about me yet. I'm the snake, hiding in the grass."

Does Snape know? Surely not. Does Lucius? Narcissa? Have they all been laughing at him, the Weasley heir working for a Death Eater? He wishes he could talk to Snape, or even Myrtle. Someone that he can rely on to tell him the truth, or something like it.

"You'll be free soon, too," Barty says. He lounges back in his chair, but that mad glint is still dancing around his eyes and so Percy watches him carefully. "Your father's on his way out, you know."

Percy tenses instantly, his wand reappearing in his hand without a second thought. "What do you know about my father?"

"He's part of Dumbledore's precious little group, isn't he? He's in the Ministry right now." Barty grins widely and licks his dry lips. "Well, he won't be there for much longer."

The attack, of course. After weeks of worrying about it happening, it's happening now, and Percy is trapped in here. He stands, but so does Barty, who know looks far less cordial and far more sly. Percy hesitates. His charms haven't begun to ring in his head; Arthur has not yet come to harm. Perhaps Percy can move quickly. He's not the best dueller, so he will have to rely on the only thing he can do: think quickly.

"What's the matter, Weasley? Don't you *hate* him?" Barty stretches the word *hate* out into a singing taunt. Percy smiles tightly.

"You fool, he's practically Dumbledore's right hand man, at least where the Ministry is concerned," Percy says. "Think, Barty. Think of the success you're having now with your father. I could do the same with mine!"

Barty narrows his eyes and snaps his fingers, and a vial of Veritaserum materialises into being between them. Ignoring his surprise that Barty has the skill for such a display of wandless magic, Percy does something truly reckless, and grabs the vial, tipping just a drop into his mouth. The dosage is three, so he hopes with one he'll get away with a mild stretching of the truth.

"I swore a vow to Tom Riddle," Percy says, entirely truthfully. "I swore a vow on my magic not to har—not to destroy….him." He forces out the last word, the potion not quite sure whether to accept that Percy's vow to not destroy the Horcruxes unless on Tom's command quite qualifies, but Barty does not seem to notice, his eyes brightening. "I know *He* has

returned, and I wish to act as soon as I am able, but I do not know how my father dying now will help me accomplish my goal."

True, true, true. Percy is nothing but skilled at the truth. Funny that a vow he thought would be his downfall is so useful. Barty stares at him for another long, considering moment and then a wide grin breaks across his face and the door behind Percy swings open.

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He's too late, of course. By the time he reaches the atrium, all that's left is a slowly drying puddle of dark red blood. His father's blood. Percy drops to his knees beside it. His charms are ringing madly in his head, so he knows his father is alive for now, but he'd been too late to stop it, whatever it may be.

"Who're you, then?"

Percy flinches and looks up, but it's only a portrait—an older woman, her face stern, wearing the white robes of a hospital matron. She peers down at him.

"Did you see a man? My father, I heard he was attacked," Percy asks.

The portrait looks around and lowers her voice. "Are you one of— *them*?"

They could be either Death Eater or the Order, and either way, he's not one of them. "Please," he says instead of answering. "Just tell me what happened."

She looks at him consideringly and then glances behind him into the depths of her portrait. Percy has no idea what she's looking at, and to be frank, he doesn't really care. He doesn't know how his father was attacked, in either timeline. He'd felt unable to face his family at the hospital, and nobody had ever told him how or why his father was injured. "A snake," the portrait says finally. "A familiar, most likely."

His snake. Tom's snake. A dangerous snake, perhaps even a cursed one. Percy's eyes drop to his father's blood and he swallows roughly. Had this happened last time? His father had survived last time, but what if the circumstances were different? A different Healer at the hospital, a slight delay in his father's treatment, someone choosing an alternate spell—any small change in the timeline could result in his father's death.

(Snake skin, coiled, eerie and silent in the dark room of an empty house).

But Tom might know what to do. Tom. Tom will have to help him. But why? Percy wants to use his father, of course. It will have to be true. Percy does want to use his father. He *could* Polyjuice into his father. It actually is not the worst idea—he does have some improvements in mind for the Order. He will have to make this idea true before he returns to Tom and begs him for help.

Percy takes a deep breath and cements that idea in his mind. He siphons some of his father's blood into a vial and looks up at the portrait of the woman. "Thank you."

At his flat, he pricks his finger impatiently and smears the blood over the wardstone he'd installed into the door, waiting for it to recognize him. Once the door clicks open, he flies into the room and skids to a halt in front of Tom, panting with exertion.

Tom takes in Percy's sweaty and anxious self and turns back to whatever he was writing on the desk without comment.

"Tom, your snake, your snake has attacked someone," Percy says in a rush. "Tom, do you know how to save him?"

"Who?" Tom asks absently, as if he could not be bothered to care in the least.

"My father," Percy says, moving even closer to the painting.

"My congratulations, then," Tom says. He scratches through a line in the parchment and then scribbles something underneath. "I understand he was something of a burden to you."

Percy inhales sharply. He's about to say something—anything, maybe even a spell—when he sees Tom's lips twitch, just the barest movement of paint on a canvas. He exhales noisily. Tom is testing him, of course, as bloody always, and if there's one thing that's true about Percy Weasley, it's that he never fails a test.

"Tom, I had a *plan*," Percy begs earnestly. "He's mine to kill when I choose, and I was going to use him, Tom. He has information about my family that I need. About Harry Potter."

Tom raises his head slowly. This version of Tom is also interested in Harry Potter, as all versions of Tom are destined to be interested in Harry Bloody Potter. Percy is so tired of Tom being interested in things other than Percy. "Then why are you here and not questioning him?"

"Tom!" Percy shouts, and then forces himself to breathe deeply so he does not say anything worse. *Control*, Percy. Sometimes it feels like all he is doing is lying to various people that expect something of him. Which version of him is the real one, in the end? "Tom, I've been planning this for years," he tries again, and maybe his voice does waver, but he is also speaking the truth. Always the truth, with Tom, and that blasted diadem. He misses his Tom, sixteen and clever and so much more *human.* "I need my father to survive. Please, Tom. You're always saying I amount to nothing, and maybe you're right, but let me deal with my father on my own time. Like you did."

Tom smirks to himself and raises an imperious hand. "You have a portrait of him already, no?"

"What? I can't—I don't have the potion, and anyway, it's not a true portrait—how do you even know about that?"

"I can enter its frame," Tom reveals casually, and somewhere in the back of his mind, Percy yelps in shock. "You're right, though, it's not a true portrait. But come, Percy. You are smarter than this. What do you have?"

“His blood,” Percy says automatically, withdrawing the vial from his robes. He worries his lips and then remembers. “Some of the snake skin.”

“Not quite blood and bone, but it’s a start,” says Tom. “And a portrait, too. Come, Percy. What can you do?”

“The portrait,” Percy muses, some of the panic leaving him as he thinks of his father’s painted face. “But Tom, a life ward is incredibly difficult to execute.”

Tom watches him intently. “There’s an idea.”

"I can't make a life ward out of my father," protests Percy, though in truth he *could* make a life ward, could he not? He could take Arthur's blood—and he already has Arthur's blood—and bind it to the portrait. Life wards traditionally are linked to items of great value, but, if he’s remembering his theory right, they don’t necessarily *have* to be. They are not Horcruxes, they do not achieve immortality, and Percy has done enough research into this type of magic to know that what a life ward really is at its core is a way for a wizard to anchor his magic on something powerful to provide extra protection. The portrait is not in and of itself magical, but he can enhance it, can't he? The portrait is but canvas and paint, but he can coat it in something—but he does not have a suitable cauldron. Well, he does, actually, he has the tiny one he used to brew All-Reveal. He can even localise the ward to protect against the snake, though that bit of magic will be the most unstable. Perhaps he ought not to make the enchantment more general; who knows what danger his father will be in over the course of the coming months?

Highly risky, of course, but he can clean it. But what to coat the portrait with? A potion would be best, of course. But he will need to imbue the potion with power.

Do you not have any protective amulets?

Percy bats away Tom's voice—although he *does* have a protective amulet. Well, not an amulet, but an item of moonstone. Tonks. Thank Merlin for Tonks.

Percy looks up as the pieces of his plan bubble and hiss inside his head. Tom is watching Percy with an expression that may even be *interest* to see what Percy may do.

"Go," he says, and Percy snaps to action.

Summon the lynx from its place of honour by his bed; cast as many protective spells as he can on the moonstone, praying it will absorb them in such a small length of time. The *Amonaphora* spell, used to reverse Transfigure an object into its component parts. It all comes back to resonance, in a way, to the idea that one's soul and one's magic is inextricably linked. Heat the cauldron and melt the moonstone. It should be impossible to melt, but Tom's right, a small and controlled application of everlasting flames will do the trick. In goes the blood to pop and crackle. Just the smallest bit of snake skin, glowering green in the light of

the flames, just enough to familiarise the potion with the feel of Tom's magic alongside his. Now the brushes. Where are the brushes? In their box, of course, tucked away in his desk. Now to meditate, to feel his magic, to summon his birthright and use it for his own means.

This type of magic is beautiful, structured, clear. Holy, even. This type of magic runs like lightning down his spine and springs into his palms when he calls. It's surprisingly easy to meditate; his father may be dying but Percy won't let that happen, which means it can't happen, which means it will all be fine.

Well done, Percy, says Tom, and Percy screams in irritation inside his mind.

Get out! He commands, and Tom falls silent. He does not need his ghost memories of Tom to interfere now; he needs to *focus.*

Percy needs his father. He wants to protect his father. He wants to use his father. He does not want him to die, not like this, not when there are so many things left unsaid in the space between them, lifetimes of anger and resentment and guilt and sorrow.

Really?

I can hate him and protect him both, Tom.

He feels his magic bristle all over his skin and flow into the brush. He feels alive, exultant, his entire body thrumming as his magic snaps and hisses inside of him.

Coat the portrait. Cast the incantation. *Accept this blood as a proxy for his life.* It's like the summer solstice, isn't it? For the price of blood, one can ask for a wish. *Accept this blood and guard it like a life.* Rich wizards do this all the time. Rich Dark wizards, of course. It's not a Horcrux. ***Don't you want a Horcrux?***

"There's nobody to kill, Tom," Percy snaps—and snaps himself right out of his trance.

Arthur's portrait glistens wetly, and even though the potion is not entirely red, in the dim light of Percy's apartment it looks like blood dripping from his father's eyes.

"You are rather interesting," Tom says. "That is Dark magic you just did. Very Dark magic."

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Percy does not work up the courage to visit his father until just after dawn. He slips into St. Mungo's under a heavy disguise and creeps silently into his father's hospital room. It's crowded; there are at least two others in the room with him. One of them, Bode, actually works at the Ministry. Percy wonders if he too is in the Order, if he too got injured doing Dumbledore's bidding.

His father is still, his face pasty and inflamed. He's covered in bandages, and he looks as though he's slowly being buried in them. Percy swallows roughly. "I saved you," he says as quietly as he can, releasing the words like an incantation, or a prayer, over his father's prone form. "But I should have been there faster. I'm so sorry, Father."

"Perce?"

Percy flinches violently and turns. It's Bill. Why is Bill here, and how did he enter the room without Percy noticing? All of his nerves are frayed from the wild, desperate night. His magic hisses inside him like a cauldron in turmoil, unable to settle into a simmer.

"Perce, you came," whispers Bill, and even though Percy looks nothing like himself, his brother comes over to him in quick, sure steps, and envelops him into a hug.

They stare at their father's body for several long minutes before Percy shakes his head and turns to go. There's so much more to do. Tomorrow at the Ministry will be absolute bedlam, and there's the issue of Crouch to consider. Oh, Merlin, he's been reporting to an actual Death Eater for weeks. He can't think of it now; his mind is full of the dark glistening sheen of the portrait, of his father's life-force bound in part to a portrait, of Tom's painted face shining with exultation as Percy invokes an incredibly Dark and dangerous ritual of his own creation.

"Percy, wait," Bill whispers, striding quickly to catch up with Percy. He steers Percy into the small waiting room next to the ward. "Why didn't you come earlier?"

Percy looks at his older brother, so young, so naive, and wants to break down into tears. He can't, of course. He has to protect Bill, protect all of them. "I can't," he whispers back. "I couldn't."

"Are you in trouble, Perce? What's going on? Mum's furious at you for some reason, and Dad says you're acting strange. Tell me what's wrong. Please."

"I can't," Percy repeats with more emphasis. "Bill, you have to trust me."

"What have you gotten yourself into?" Bill reaches out and clutches Percy's upper arms tightly. "Percy, whatever it is, I can help."

"People are watching me," he says, meeting his brother's guileless blue eyes. "Everyone is watching me." He hesitates. "Crouch is a Death Eater, Bill. Tell the Order. Tell them that if they act on it, he'll kill me."

Bill ignores those revelations, shocking as they must have been for him, and squeezes Percy's arms. "Percy, we need to go to Dumbledore. We need to protect you."

"They're watching me, Bill!" Percy wrenches himself away from Bill's hold and stares at the only portrait in the room, an empty landscape. Bloody portraits, always watching, always living. It isn't right to cheat death. It isn't fair.

Bill comes up behind him and lays a gentle hand on Percy's shoulder. "Dumbledore can help."

"Like he helped Ron, when he nearly died battling a chessboard Dumbledore set up to play with the Dark Lord? Like he helped Ginny, or any of them, really, facing a basilisk? Like he helped them when Sirius Black and a werewolf cornered them in the Shrieking Shack, like he helped Cedric Diggory, like he helped Dad? Dumbledore is concerned only with whatever game he's playing, and the rest of us are expendable on that chess board, Bill. Don't be an idiot. Dumbledore is trying to win a war, and fine, let him try and win it...but being his soldier affords no protection, and if you think it does, you're a fool. Even you—"

Here Percy cuts himself off, breathing heavily. He had been about to say *even you nearly died fighting a werewolf*, but he can't give up the truth, not now, not when he's so close to the end.

"Even me what, Percy?" Bill's voice is even.

"Even you have to admit our family is in danger," Percy continues weakly.

Bill sighs and tightens his grip on Percy's shoulder. "We are," he says quietly. "It's obvious that Harry is in the centre of all of this. He dreamt of Dad's injury. Some sort of dream, Ron says, where he was the snake."

Percy, whose heart has not stopped hammering since he was in front of Barty Crouch, freezes in place before stuttering back into an irregular rhythm.

Bill continues without noticing. "And Ron's in the centre of it too, and Ginny and Fred and George. And now you're in the middle of it, in a different way, it seems. We are in danger, Perce, but even if Dumbledore has a plan we're not privy to, he's not the whole Order. Being alone won't save your life either."

"Harry dreamt he was the snake?" Percy says, instead of responding to that last.

Bill shakes his head in wonder. "That poor kid," he says. "Seeing right into You Know Who's head."

"Into the snake's head," Percy says through frozen lips. His heart, so frenetic through lying to a Death Eater and the Dark Lord himself seems to quell at this strange news.

Bill shrugs. "Maybe You Know Who was in the snake's head too."

Maybe the Dark Lord *is* the snake. Of course; maybe he is an Animagus. Of course he would have a form and of course it would be the snake. Although, Percy thinks with a shiver, that means that the Dark Lord transformed into a snake to bite his father. And why? What are they guarding?

Something He wants badly, Percy remembers Snape saying. But he'd never told Percy what it was, and Percy hadn't bothered to ask again.

"I'll tell the rest of them about Crouch," Bill says. "And Percy—just think about it, okay? We're family, and we'll look after each other, even if Dumbledore won't."

Percy nods absently, no longer interested in Bill's pleas. What does He want badly, badly enough to kill a member of the Order for?

Snape walks into the room and both Weasley brothers tense. Of course Snape is here, saving his father's life. How does Snape explain this to the Dark Lord? Is he tortured every time he has to follow Dumbledore's orders? How does he report to two masters and not reveal his resentment, his impossible predicament? "He'll live, barely," Snape says, and Percy's heart begins to hammer again. "Weasley—come with me."

Percy and Bill both take a step forward. Snape's eyes flick over them both and he rolls his eyes. "Percival," he orders. "Come."

Despite everything that happened tonight, Percy feels a faint flicker of pride when Bill drops back into a seat. He follows Snape into the hallway.

"You have learned something?"

"I am almost positive he made the other Founder's Artefacts into Horcruxes," Percy reports. "And hid one in the orphanage. I have a lead."

"So nothing new, then," Snape says in disgust.

"I'm close," Percy says, passing a hand over his face. "I'm so close. I just need a little more time."

"Do what you must," Snape orders. Percy eyes him warily: Snape had earlier been so insistent that Percy not succumb to whatever magic Tom still possesses, so he must be nervous, now, to suggest otherwise.

"What was my father guarding?"

Snape huffs an irritated laugh. "You have not guessed? The prophecy, Weasley." Snape holds a hand, forestalling Percy's objections. "I do not believe either it holds much value—but while He is obsessed with it, we have time to act."

"My father almost died," Percy says. "Where was his protection? The Dark Lord transformed into a snake and attacked my father and he nearly bled out alone on the floor. What *happened*?"

"He was not alone," says Snape sharply. Then he pauses. "The Dark Lord does not transform into Nagini. She is his familiar."

Percy shakes his head to clear it. Of course the Dark Lord isn't the bloody snake, otherwise Neville Longbottom would have killed the Dark Lord when he'd lopped off the snake's head with the Sword of Gryffindor. Percy can't think of anyone less likely to kill the Dark Lord than Neville Longbottom. But why would Harry...?

"He may as well have been alone, for all the help it did him. Is this what Dumbledore promises?"

Snape does something very unexpected: he grabs Percy and shakes him, just once, hard enough to shock him. "Dumbledore is not your concern, you little brat," he says heatedly, gripping Percy's shoulders tightly. "Your role in this is clear, Weasley. Speak to Tom and find the Horcruxes. If one of your family is to die it will be due to your own mistakes and not Dumbledore. He is fighting a war, Weasley, and he needs you to win this battle, even if he does not know it."

Percy wrenches away. To his embarrassment he feels tears begin to well up in his eyes. Snape is right, after all. None but Fred died in the original timeline, so if any of his family dies now, the blame will lie solely with Percy's meddling.

“Crouch is a Death Eater,” he says instead. “Barty Crouch, Jr. He’s Polyjuicing himself to look like his father. I learned today.”

Snape’s surprise is evident in the arch of his eyebrows and the way his dark eyes flick to and from Percy, as if searching through an invisible memory. But his voice is measured when he says, “I see.”

Percy explains it to him quickly, the reveal, Barty’s role in the World Cup. “He thinks I’m *one of them*,” Percy says, the disgust coating his tone. Then, with some panic, “Snape, I don’t know what to do.”

“You do nothing suspicious,” says Snape at once. “Barty Crouch is a loose cannon; I do not think anyone other than the Dark Lord knows he is alive. I will have to investigate further. Do not attract his ire; say what you must say to have him believe you are aligned with his goals. He could kill you on a whim.”

“But I have to keep hunting the Horcruxes,” protests Percy, but more by reflex than anything else. “I’m close, Snape.”

“We’ll have to kill him, I expect,” mutters Snape, massaging the bridge of his nose with one hand and half-turning away. “But it will have to look like an accident. If there was a way to see what he knows…”

“I can do it,” Percy insists, though only minutes before he’d been thinking hopelessly rather the opposite. “I can spy on him. See what he knows.”

Snape turns back to him. “The Horcruxes are more important.”

“I can do both.”

Snape’s doubt is even more clear than his earlier surprise. Percy reads it written over the curl of his lips and scowls in response.

“I can.”

To his surprise, Snape only keeps him pinned in his glance for a second longer before he sighs and gives a brief shake of his head, his greasy hair falling to one side. “You’ll have to, I expect. What is it you need from me?”

“I’m sorry?”

“What can I do to help you?” Snape says. Despite the conciliatory words, his tone is sharp, as if they are back in tutelage and Snape is walking him through a recipe as if he were an idiot, asking rhetorical questions meant to force Percy’s thoughts to fall along the same line.

The familiarity of it steadies Percy. Now, like then, he allows his mind to rove, thinking through the implications of what Snape is saying. Barty Crouch is dangerous, particularly since nobody is observing him. He thinks Percy is aligned with him, and so Percy must continue holding up appearances to the same. But they have no time for Percy to waste; finding the Horcruxes is imperative, more so than anything else they may be working on, and so Snape is not offering to help out of concern for Percy, but because Snape needs Percy to succeed as badly as Percy needs himself to succeed.

“I need to know where Tom Riddle’s Hogwarts letter was addressed,” says Percy. “I thought we could use the Map, which is anchored to the registry.”

Snape blinks in surprise but thinks this request through, cocking his head as he considers it. Finally he gives a short, brusque nod. “The registry must retain the memory of the Hogwarts letters, since we are capable of sending multiple if the first does not reach, and we use the same magic to send exam scores,” he muses. “But this memory would be from many years ago.”

“I don’t know how else to see where Tom Riddle grew up,” admits Percy, his face flaming. “We need an address.”

Snape reaches into a pocket and pulls out the folded Map that Percy had built on top of the Marauder's Map. “Take this. Do the best you can. If you cannot succeed with this approach, send me a letter asking me for a recipe modification for Headache Draught. If you succeed, send me a similar letter but for Dragon Pox. I will try my best, but I fear I will not be successful, as I have no reason to look at the registry, and the Headmaster guards it carefully, for much would be risked to have the locations of each student open to perusal.”

Percy nods, gripping the Map like a lifeline. Its familiar magic sparks beneath his fingers, which soothes him more than he’d like to admit. “And my father, he will live?”

“It could go either way,” admits Snape quietly. “The venom, it’s quite dangerous. I’ve done the best I can; it’s up to his magic now to power his healing. He had a surge of energy, early, but I fear his reserves may be exhausted soon.”

Percy bites his lips and nods. *Please*, he begs the life-ward, sitting clumsily in his room where he’d left it. *Please do your job.*

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The first thing he does when he returns home is cover his father's portrait and move it to his closet, hopefully out of reach of Tom. The second thing he does is brew himself a very strong cup of tea. And the third thing he does is stand in front of Tom's portrait silently until the painted figure deigns to give him his attention.

"My feelings for my family are complicated," Percy says evenly. Tom merely blinks and regards Percy lazily. "But my father is mine to save and mine to kill. I have plans, Tom. I am your servant—but I am tired of being dismissed by all who know me."

"The life ward worked, then?"

"And I have enough of his hair for years of Polyjuice," Percy confirms, though he has no real intention of using them. "I have *plans*, Tom. I wish not to murder my father but to use him for something far more valuable: his proximity to Dumbledore."

Perhaps it is merely due to Percy's skill at portraiture, or the efficacy of the potion, but Tom looks so lifelike, so realistic, as a smirk plays on his pale lips. "I misjudged you, I think," he says casually. "You are more interesting than I first assumed."

"I didn't want you to feel threatened by me."

"Oh, Percy." Tom's expression is pitying. "I would never feel threatened by you."

Percy clenches his toes together but otherwise does not react.

"I have come to the conclusion that you are correct," Tom continues, motioning to the reams of parchment on his painted desk. "I believe my chances of success are maximised by combining several of my Horcruxes into one. The locket is—at the orphanage. Well, nearby, at least. A wizard like you will surely be able to find it. We shall need to find one more."

“The cup?” Percy brazenly asks.

Tom’s eyebrows raise. “Oh, you *have* been busy. Let us see. It is an interesting question, really, to theorise where I may have stored it. Clearly I succeeded at placing the diadem at Hogwarts, underneath Dumbledore’s nose; and I gave the diary, as you know, to Abraxas.”

“I thought perhaps Gringotts.”

Tom’s expression sours so quickly that Percy flinches in reflex. “I never had a Gringotts vault.”

“Why not?”

“I would never deign to store my valuables in the filthy hands of goblins,” hisses Tom, and Percy flinches again at the venom in his voice. Perhaps Tom never had a vault; he certainly did not have a sponsoring wizard before he was of age, and maybe he did not make enough

money at Borgin and Burkes to qualify for the minimum deposit on a vault with adequate protections. Percy feels abruptly sorry for Tom, which is always a rather strange experience.

“Perhaps someone else?” Percy posits hesitantly when Tom seems unlikely to speak again. “Nott?”

“I would not trust Nott with an ounce of gold,” Tom says dismissively, some of the anger fading from his face. “I will think more on this matter.”

Thank me**,** Tom's voice whispers in Percy's head.

Right. Of course. Tom may respect Percy's show of strength—but, as he had made clear, Tom alone is the master and Percy must always be the servant. He sinks to his knees and looks up in gratitude. "Thank you, my Lord."

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Percy does go home for Christmas. Of course, his family is not home, secreted away in the Black family manor. But Percy walks through the silent Burrow and allows himself to feel something like sadness, or maybe loneliness.

Dear Percy,

Bill told me in private that he saw you at St. Mungo’s, that he thinks you are in danger. Percy, we are family, even if we fight. Come back to us.

(“Where is it you live, Weasley? Ottery St. Catchpole, is it? I hear your parents fled the place. Any idea where they might have gone?”)

Your money is yours to do with what you wish. We can talk about it, Percy. I promise I am not upset any longer about the inheritance. I know we can come to a compromise.

(“Think after this is over you’ll change your name? I’ve the double indignity of sharing both names with my father—but I decided it would bother him more if I refused to change it. Let the legacy of *Bartemius Crouch* be decided by me. But you *could* claim the Prewett name. I can help you with it.”)

I know how much you value your job at the Ministry, but you’ve got to see reason, surely. Promotions won’t matter after You Know Who comes out into the open. There’ll be no politics.

(“I want you to scout out others that are like us, Percy. Young men ready to succeed where our fathers failed. We have potential, and the Dark Lord will reward us for our initiative.”)

I know you’ll do the right thing.

Love,

Mum

(He keeps the jumper his mother sends him but doesn't send a note. It's so cold, sometimes, in his flat that he can't bear to give it back).

Chapter End Notes

A bunch of you guessed what was up with Crouch, but hopefully it was still fun to have Percy come slowly to the same realisation. Poor guy.

CONFINEMENT (3/4)

Chapter Notes

I'll be out for a few days on holiday so posting this a bit early.

Thanks to everyone who left me their thoughts on Percy. Some disagreement about whether or not you actually like Percy, but I enjoyed reading your thoughts either way!

We're really getting into it now. Horcruxes, Death Eaters, and the Order, oh my. What scenes from the next few books are you interested in seeing Percy's take on?

CHAPTER NINE: CONFINEMENT (3/4)

1995—1996 (Percy is 19 & 32, Severus is 34, Harry is 15, the Dark Lord is, by some accounts, 1)

January 1996

One bright spot in the daily darkness of January is that Percy finds it easier than anticipated to find Tom Riddle's original address. The Map unfolds under his hands like a familiar textbook, and with Tom hanging right outside Percy's bedroom, it proves fairly trivial for Percy to take a copy of a map of London and force it to anchor on Percy's Map. Anchors on anchors on anchors; Percy thought the magic may degrade, but after a series of carefully inked runes fade into the parchment, two dots appear in London.

Percy Weasley.

Tom Riddle.

Percy is a bit disappointed; he'd hoped he may create a map that shows him the whereabouts of all wizards at all times, or at least those in London proper. Perhaps with more time he could draw more on the map, force the registry to give up more of its secrets. It is no matter, for now; he wants to see where Tom has been far more than he cares about monitoring the populace of Wizarding Britain.

Once he can see Tom's dot hovering over his, he pushes at the map with a variant of that old spell he'd once used to drop himself into the midst of the Marauders, laughing over their creation. Instead of asking it to tell him its secrets, he focuses all of his magic on Tom Riddle's name and commands the map to tell him its *history.*

Show me Tom, Percy commands, dragging his wand over a small row of runes in neat, careful handwriting that he'd written with a dreadfully expensive ink he'd purchased just for this purpose. His Arithmancy is sound; he'd identified the mathematically optimal combination of runes that indicate *location-history-soul-reveal.* He breathes out, his magic buzzing to attention. He allows his magic to run down his arms and spark at his fingers, to intertwine in a complex dance over the parchment, like soldiers at his bidding. *Show me Tom. Show me his history.*

The registry pushes back, through the Marauder's Map, through Percy's map, through the carefully ink lines of London, and Percy bites back a curse as his magic stings his fingers. It is as clear of a *no* as Percy can imagine.

But he measures his magic against the challenge, like Tom had taught him how to do all those years ago, and marshals his energy about him. Unbidden, his lips curve into a slow smile as his magic sparks around him. *Show me Tom.*

Not allowed not allowed not allowed clangs the privacy charm on the registry, and Percy almost scoffs at it.

Show me Tom, now, he commands. *I created you for my bidding, and you will do my bidding as I command. Show me Tom.*

Percy sends a rush of magic through the parchment, which flexes and crumples like an organ beating blood through his veins. He feels his own magic pulse in response, feels the echo of Tom's magic beating alongside his own, and then with a rush the registry subsides and the parchment flattens out in front of him.

He tenses, expecting to hear an echo of a voice, or a whispered spell, or even Slughorn writing out an acceptance letter. Instead, he feels the faint spray of rain on his face and shivers unconsciously as his skin prickles with cold.

On the parchment, a dot appears, weakly at first, and then a strong, confident blotch of ink. *Tom Marvolo Riddle*, it reads, in gently curling gold script. Percy looks for his own flat on the map and sees that his dot, and the portrait Tom's, have disappeared.

Suddenly the dot begins to move, making its way down the street to a building, where it stays, pulsing, for many seconds. Percy comes to his senses and peers closely at the map, writing the intersection of streets where Tom seems to be. He watches in fascination as the dot dips in and out of the intersection, going to what could be a school, or perhaps a market, or just a nearby park. For several heartbeats the dot disappears completely, and then it returns at regular intervals. Hogwarts, perhaps?

And then the dot reappears on another edge of the map, near enough to where Percy recognises the Apparation point for Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley. Here the dot stays for what could be months or years, sometimes appearing in other parts of London, and occasionally moving so quickly around that the cursive *Tom Marvolo Riddle* above appears to blur. Then Percy gasps as the dot disappears altogether.

The pause is just long enough for Percy to begin to worry. With a start, he sees his own dot appear, and move around on the map, going to the Leaky Cauldron at the beginning of each school year, and then looking at the neighbourhoods he'd examined with Tonks for his flat. Then a few seconds later Tom appears again next to his own dot, and there they stay, small still circles of ink, until Percy has to conclude the spell is over.

He sags back, the parchment fluttering down to rest on the surface of his bed. To see eighty years of Tom's life, to see the pattern of his movements as he threads in and out of London on his own mysterious missions until Percy brought him back…it's incredibly intimate, and incredibly jarring, and reminds Percy yet again that before he was a Dark Lord, Tom was just a boy growing into a man like any other. The Map must not have shown the other Horcruxes; the diary did not seem to appear at the Leaky Cauldron, nor the version of Quirrell possessed by Tom's shade. But still, even this glimpse into Tom's life…

Percy shivers. Unbidden, he wonders what his life would show, one day, to anyone curious enough to look. Far too many late nights at the Ministry, he supposes.

But now he has a guess for the orphanage, or at least an intersection that may prove likely.

Thank you, he whispers to the map, which seems to shudder in surprise at his thanks.

Well, he means it.

***

As expected, the intersection that he Apparates to the following weekend shows nothing more than a series of drab Muggle office buildings. Percy pokes around the best he can, trying to avoid the Muggles in their odd grey suits, but he cannot find any trace of a Horcrux, or even any magic.

Feeling buoyed after his success chatting up the Muggles in Little Hangleton, Percy steps into the path of the first friendly looking Muggle he sees, a man around his age who reminds him quite a bit of Charlie in his high, sharp cheekbones, and asks politely if there is a Library of Records, or even a Library of Archives, nearby that he may use.

"There's the public library three streets down," says the man dubiously. "I dunno if they have *archives*, but they'd know more than me. Three down, one to the right."

The streets in this part of London are a bit of a tangle, and there's a Muggle staircase of some kind leading down into the dark. Percy edges around it, feeling nervous at the roar and clatter coming from below ground. Muggles in London seem to enjoy descending into the depths of the Earth, though for what purpose, Percy cannot really imagine.

But he makes it three down and one to the right and comes across a large red-brick building with a smattering of children on the steps, their parents nearby, producing smoke from small

white pipes as they chat among themselves. Percy gives the children an even wider berth than the staircase from earlier and cautiously goes inside.

He relaxes once he's past the children, for this Muggle library looks rather like other libraries that he's known, if one ignores how still and silent the bookshelves are. There's even a large oak desk helpfully labelled *Information*, and a woman standing behind it that reminds him strongly of his Muggleborn friend in the Ministry. Certainly their glasses, speckled and brown, their eyes oddly arresting behind the frames, are the same. After several seconds of working up the courage, Percy walks up to the counter and clears his throat.

"Hello," the woman greets him, setting down a book that she had been perusing. "May I help you?"

"There used to be an orphanage nearby," Percy says, hoping he will be comprehensible to this Muggle. "Three streets up, and one to the right. Er, to the left."

He waits, but the woman continues to look at him politely, with no clear sign of comprehension. Finally she clears her throat and posits, "And you are looking for more information about this orphanage?"

"Yes," he says, relieved he's gotten through to her. A bit slow, but he expects most Muggles are. "Could you fetch the appropriate book for me?"

The woman's lips curve into a laugh, which Percy is surprised to realise is quick and lovely. He clears his throat, his ears beginning to burn, and directs his gaze to the desk in front of her. *Anna*, he belatedly realises it reads on a small rectangular gold plaque. "I'm afraid I'll need a bit more than that. Do you know the name of the orphanage? What years was it in operation?"

"In the 1940s," Percy responds hastily. "I believe it was called Wool's Orphanage, run by a matron of the same name. It shut down some years back and was converted to office buildings."

"There were several orphanages that opened for the war that were later shut down, I believe," she says thoughtfully. "We learned about it in school. Do you have any other information?"

Percy shakes his head. He supposes a Muggle cannot cast a charm to index a great many books at once; perhaps this woman, Anna, will have to physically search through each book to see if Wool's was mentioned. "I don't know much else."

"May I ask why you are interested?" Anna asks. She looks up and gives him a friendly grin at his start of surprise. "You don't need to answer, if you would prefer to keep it to yourself. I'm just curious what brought you to my desk today."

To Percy's utmost surprise, he finds himself flushing harder, the heat emanating off the back of his neck nearly visible. "I know someone—knew someone, I suppose—who was raised there, I think," he murmurs, rubbing at the back of his beck with his left hand. "He, er…he's not around anymore, so he can't tell me more. But I'd like to learn more about what happened to him, and I thought this ought to be a good place to start."

Anna nods soberly. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Percy opens his mouth to explain, and then, reviewing what he’d said, clicks it shut abruptly. If he’d been talking about a Muggle, the Muggle would be at minimum in his fifties or sixties. Percy can see why the woman had assumed he’d lost Tom, which, he supposes, he rather had. “Thank you,” Percy says awkwardly.

“Your best bet are the newspapers, I’d reckon,” Anna says, pointing with one slender hand toward a section of the library. “If the orphanage shut down, there’s likely to be *something* about it, and that may tell us more.”

Percy murmurs his thanks and walks away with quick steps, feeling her gaze on his back the entire time. He’s an idiot; he does not know why he’d volunteered to spy on Crouch, since he apparently is incapable of subterfuge, even to a Muggle woman his own age. Merlin’s beard.

Percy stands in front of the puzzling stack of newspapers for several minutes before he senses a presence at his shoulder. Resisting the urge to flinch, he turns, but it is only the pretty librarian, back to torment him further.

“You seem a bit lost,” she says delicately.

Percy resists the urge to Apparate away. “I am,” he excuses himself. “At school, our library was a bit…different. Er, that is, we had a different system.” A system where one could tap one’s wand and get the information they desired.

With Anna’s help, it takes just under an hour to find a newspaper that mentions the orphanage by name. Percy gives up trying to awkwardly apologise for taking her time about twenty minutes in, after she points out that aside from the smattering of small children ducking in and out of the brightly coloured section near the front, the library is all but empty.

“Got it,” Anna crows, pointing triumphantly to an article. Percy grabs the paper from her and scans it carefully; there is a picture of the intersection he was just at, three streets up and one to the left, and he recognises it despite the fact that the orphanage in the picture no longer exists.

WOOL’S TO CLOSE; ORPHANS ‘OUT OF LUCK’, trumpets the headline. Percy blinks at the paper, but the last hour has helped him become more accustomed to the strange, still newspapers the Muggles have to contend with, so he is able to move past his instinctive flinch and scan the article eagerly for news.

Wool’s Orphanage has been a notable institution for many years…

…out of funding…

…orphans to enter a lottery for placement into boarding schools or other group homes…

Dennis Bishop, former orphan and now building manager, agrees that it’s a “real shame” to shut down such a historic institution. “Wool’s changed my life. It got us through the war. I still have nightmares about the bombing, but I felt safe here. We all did.”

At this last, Percy looks up, his eyes wide. “The war,” he says, pointing at the quote from Dennis Bishop. “Which war is he talking about?”

“I imagine it’s World War II,” says Anna, reading over Percy’s shoulder. “Given he mentions bombing.”

“And this is the same war that you mentioned, in the 1940s.”

Anna gives him an odd look. Percy waves it aside; he thinks that it’s likely this *World War* they speak of is nothing more than Grindelwald’s reign, packaged for Muggle understanding. “Yes, I’d think so.”

“And Dennis Bishop? Can you help me find him?”

“If he lives in London still, he’ll be in the phone book,” Anna says, holding out her hand for the newspaper. “Would you like me to make a copy of this as well, while you look?”

Percy is briefly distracted by watching her make a copy of the newspaper, involving a massive black box with several flashing lights, but he manages to flip through the phone book himself and find *Bishop, Dennis* next to several numbers.

“There’s a telephone box outside,” Anna tells him, handing over the copy of the newspaper. It’s strange parchment, white and flimsy, and he holds it gingerly in case it may disintegrate in his hands. “Please let me know if there’s anything else I can help you with. I’ve not had so exciting of an ask the whole time I’ve been here.”

Percy is feeling nearly giddy with excitement, which he blames for the effusive tone that comes out of his mouth next. “You’re helping me save the world,” he tells her, accompanied by what he hopes is the last flush of the evening.

She grins at him a bit bemusedly. “What, are you a secret agent or something?”

“Something like that,” he agrees.

“Well, come back sometime and tell me what Dennis Bishop says,” she says, giving him a wink. “If you’re allowed, that is.”

“I most definitely won’t be allowed,” he tells her regretfully. Of all the Muggles he’s met, she’s certainly been the nicest, and most definitely the most helpful. He almost wishes he could tell her how much she *was* helping him save the world.

Of course, depending on whether this Dennis Bishop actually knew Tom Riddle.

It only takes him six tries (and most of the Muggle money he’d brought) to figure out how to use the blasted telephone box. It looks similar to the one used as the entrance to the Ministry, so he’s able to get inside and lift up the black telephone gingerly, but the dial confuses him, and it takes nearly half an hour to figure out how to get the little silver Muggle coins into the slot and then painstakingly dial in the number written next to Dennis Bishop’s name.

Truly exhausting, if this is how Muggles communicate. Though when Dennis Bishop's voice crackles through the telephone, Percy has to jump. It's almost as if the man is standing right beside him! Remarkable. Percy itches to examine the device further, to see if he can replicate it with a charm, but he has work to do.

"What do you want?" Bishop sounds old and crotchety, but Percy has years of experience working with old and crotchety wizards at the Ministry, and he figures the strategy should be about the same for Muggles.

"I wish to ask you a few questions about Tom Riddle," he says brightly, making sure to enunciate each word clearly. "I have reason to believe that you knew him as a boy? Or at least attended Wool's Orphanage during the same years."

The silence is prolonged. Percy is just wondering if he needs to insert another coin into the box when Bishop's voice returns. "I will not speak of Tom."

"Oh, please, sir," Percy says instantly. "I really cannot get the information I require any other way. Surely you can spare fifteen minutes? I am happy to meet you at your convenience."

"The only reason I would speak of Tom is if you were planning on killing him," the old man says, surprisingly viciously, and Percy holds the telephone a few more centimetres from his ears.

"Well actually," he replies, discomfited, "I rather am."

***

Dear Percy,

Your father is doing well. I was saddened not to see you at the hospital. Bill told me that you are facing great stress at work. I urge you to speak to those familiar to you, but I understand the burden you are under.

Love,

Mum

(This letter escapes the fiery fate of previous correspondence, and is instead tucked neatly away with a few other choice possessions).

***

Dennis Bishop agrees to meet Percy Weasley. Their meeting is short. Primarily one of them speaks, and what he does say is very little. Luckily, Percy is adept at reading between the lines. He wonders what, exactly, Tom did to scare a little boy so thoroughly that he refuses to speak of it even decades later, but he supposes it's a moot point by now.

Dennis is very clear. At the orphanage, Tom was quietly cruel in the way that children can be, though strange happenings seemed to follow him wherever he went. Dead pets, submissive snakes, that sort of thing.

No, Tom hated the orphanage, and Dennis is insistent that Tom never returned there. Where *it* happened, whatever *it* may be, was somewhere else entirely.

***

Percy sees the caves, exactly as Bishop describes them. They are across a foreboding sea, high in the crumbling hills, accessible only by boat. As Percy does not have the time to Transfigure a boat that will carry him safely over those choppy waves—nor the idiocy required to believe the cave is not heavily protected—he returns to the Ministry after making a careful sketch of the cave.

He chooses not to tell Tom what he's discovered. He doubts Tom will be amenable to the idea that Percy spoke to someone from his past. Not to mention, he does not want Tom to know that Percy is getting closer, since Percy has no intention of resurrecting another Dark Lord.

He sees his father once more, at King's Cross, shepherding the hordes of children back to school, as conspicuous as they please. Even Sirius Black bounds across the platform, snapping at birds and drawing attention with his yelps of delight. A bloody idiot, really. Percy sees Draco Malfoy mutter something to his mother and rolls his eyes. Pettigrew would have made it very clear to all the Death Eaters just what form Sirius takes on as an animagus.

Tonks is there too, with Bill and Moody and even Remus Lupin. The entire Order, protecting Harry Potter, which makes it abundantly clear just who is in the Order. Idiots, all of them, painting targets on their backs.

In the last timeline, Percy rather remembered his mother pleading with him repeatedly to come back to his family, to accept Dumbledore, to repent. In this timeline, the set line of her jaw as he approaches would suggest that his claiming of the Prewett heir name eroded what little credibility as a Weasley son Percy may have. Percy hadn't replied to her letter; what was there to say, when Crouch hovers so closely to Percy, when he spends every day feeling as though a Devil's Snare is tightening around his chest?

Percy and his mother may have spent the rest of the day locked in the frozen reproach in each other's eyes, but his father pushes through, looking wan and weak but very much alive.

"Perce," he says joyfully, moving in for a hug. Percy flinches—he doesn't think Barty reports regularly to the Dark Lord, but Lucius Malfoy is right there, watching this reunion with eagle eyes—and Arthur falters.

"I am glad to see you are well, Father," he says with clipped precision. “One hopes this experience would...curb your enthusiasm for volunteering for additional responsibility.”

Tonks scowls at him from her position shouldering Harry. He scowls right back.

Bill steps forward. Percy never should have confided in Bill; he now clearly believes he is an *expert* on Percy and therefore should be allowed to interfere in conversations that do not include him. “Hello, Perce,” he says. “Nice to see you again.”

Percy rolls his eyes. He silently casts a diagnostic charm on his father and relaxes when it whispers in his mind that his father truly is healing. Now to give a reason for his attendance.

“I hoped to speak to the Hogwarts students,” he says, catching each of their eyes in turn. “I hear you lot are stirring up trouble at school. I am sure I do not need to remind you that you ought to obey your professors and focus on your studies. Needless recklessness and rebellion do not suit your interests, and you do not always know who is listening.”

Ron, Harry, Fred, and George share matching looks of disgust, though Hermione and Ginny look more thoughtful. Percy had not meant to impart any particular message—he has nothing really to say to them, save that they ought to be more bloody careful—but if the girls believe he is attempting subtlety, let them puzzle out whatever they believe he is saying. They ought to all act with a bit more caution.

“Mr. Weasley,” says the silky tones of Lucius Malfoy. Percy half turns to see both Malfoys, uncomfortably close to the phalanx of Order members. “I admit I have...missed our meetings.”

“And I as well,” he says politely. “Though I admit lately my responsibilities at the Ministry have increased.”

Narcissa hovers behind Lucius, who merely smiles thinly, pressing his pale lips together over his lips. “Always good to see a young man with some ambition,” he says smoothly. “Arthur. You’re looking rather ill. Long hours at the Ministry.”

Arthur bristles and steps in front of Percy. “My health is not your concern, Lucius.”

Lucius gives him a long look. “I see. Nevertheless I hope the your *extracurricular activities* do not prove to be more detrimental to your health. Mr. Weasley. I look forward to your owl.”

Lucius turns and stalks away. Narcissa holds Percy’s eye for a frozen moment and then murmurs, very quietly, “*Be careful*.” Before Percy can respond, she hurries away, Draco at her heels.

“She just threatened you, Arthur,” Molly whispers in a harsh tone.

“No she didn’t,” Percy snaps back. “She’s warning you, and she’s right. You’ve got to be more careful. All of you have got to be more careful. You’ve not made any secret of your allegiances, and it isn’t lack of opportunity nor skill on the part of the Death Eaters that’s keeping you alive. You’re fooling yourselves if you think you are all acting with subtlety. What is this, the key component of the group, all traipsing about to protect Harry Potter, who has suddenly acquired a dog? Use a disguising charm, or the bloody invisibility cloak, or come in small groups. Why are you all acting so brazenly? This isn’t a game. Tonks, you at least should know better.”

Tonks doesn’t retort, which he hopes means that she is taking his concerns seriously. It’ll be a miracle if they all make it out of this alive. Percy gives them all one last look and then turns on his heels, taking quick, hasty steps away and praying that they will all survive the year.

***

The very next day, there is a mass breakout from Azkaban. Percy stares at the screaming face of Bellatrix Lestrange and feels incredibly numb. He walks over to his desk without thinking, dips his quill into the ink, and begins writing to Andromeda Tonks.

***

Andromeda agrees to meet him, though her daughter seems content to ignore him after their last, tense meeting. Percy dons his nice maroon robes for the occasion, though they meet only at her house instead of a fancy café. Andromeda is wearing all black, and her stern, forbidding face is pale against the dark ruffles at her neck. He pulls his robes tighter around his neck as he stands on her stoop and casts a wandless warming charm to brace against the chill.

“Mr. Weasley-Prewett,” she greets him brusquely.

“Madam Tonks,” he says back, inclining his head in respect. He waits, but she does not step aside, seemingly content to pin him under a harsh glare on her doorstep.

“Are you a Death Eater?” Andromeda asks bluntly. He blinks, startled, and she gives an irritated huff of a sigh. “Mr. Weasley-Prewett, surely you know what is being said about you. If you do not maintain awareness of your own image, your ambitions will come to naught in the end. Are you a Death Eater? I do not wish to invite you in if you are, which I’m sure you can appreciate.”

“I—no,” he replies, discomfited. “Shall I show you my arm?”

“Your word will do,” she says shortly and turns, leading him into her house.

Tea awaits them in the main room. Percy takes the seat opposite and waits patiently as she pours them both tea. “While I appreciate your trust in me, I feel as though I should point out that a word of a Death Eater would not amount to much.”

Andromeda pauses in the pouring to give him an arch look. “Don’t flatter yourself, Mr. Weasley. Even if you were a Death Eater, I rather doubt you could best me in a duel. I am a Black daughter, and we are fearsome. I believe you’ve met my sister?”

Percy takes the cup of tea and fortifies himself with a sip. “That is why I am here,” he says. When she tenses, he hurries to explain. “Not about Lady Malfoy; I saw her briefly at King’s Cross, and I believe she is...” He searches for the word. He had been planning on saying *well*, but that, of course, could hardly be true.

“Alive,” Andromeda contributes. “Yes. So you are here about Bella. Tell me, Mr. Weasley-Prewett. What interest do you have in Bellatrix Black?”

“Please, call me Percy.” He takes another sip while he collects himself. He had charted out a strategy, of course, but Andromeda Tonks is not an easy woman with whom to converse. “What was her relationship to the Dark Lord?”

Andromeda, to her credit, does not flinch at the question. She merely sighs and places her teacup on its saucer so delicately it does not even make a soft clink, a motion that is clearly so ingrained in her breeding that she does it unconsciously. “Bella loved him,” she says softly. “Bella was...is...a formidable woman: passionate, intelligent, powerful. She would not be content settling for anything other than what the Dark Lord gave her.”

“His trust?”

“His power,” she corrects him crisply. “I never served—I imagine you know my history well enough to guess as to why. But I met him, once, and his power was something to behold. His magic felt old. Not *weak*, of course, but *old* like the old tales, like the legends. It was intoxicating to be around, and if he kept you close, you could feed on his magic as if it were an elixir.”

Percy furrows his eyebrows and leans in. “Literally feed?”

“His followers claimed he made them more powerful, but I do not know whether that was truth or mere propaganda. But I honestly cannot imagine what Bella would have done without the Dark Lord to join. The Ministry would have hardly kept her interest. She was not interested in academia. She did not like to create or discover—merely wield.”

Not for the first time, Percy wonders how many powerful, skilled wizards become Dark because there is nothing left for them to do, no government-sanctioned activities that full the urge to tap fully into one’s magic, to stretch one’s limits, to keep learning and growing and pushing oneself forward.

“What was she like as a child?”

Andromeda gives him a sharp glance but continues to answer his questions. “I know you want me to say that she was cruel and twisted from birth, and she *was* in turmoil all her life, but the best way I can describe her is impatient.” Andromeda holds up a hand to forestall Percy’s immediate question. “She was impatient from the beginning. She learned quickly and she always, constantly yearned for *more*. More knowledge, more magic, more attention, more power. She bored easily of things that were too easy for her; she mastered skills and dismissed them; no boy could hold her attention. In truth when she first found the Dark Lord I admit I was relieved. She seemed better, calmer, until He began growing in power and the Death Eaters became openly violent, and then I believe Bella truly gave herself over to the Dark Arts. I know you have studied them, Mr. Weasley-Prewett, and even used them yourself. You can study the Dark Arts for years and experience no harm, but to truly claim them as part of your magic, you must give yourself to them truly...and there is no returning when you do.”

“Fascinating,” Percy breathes, his eyes alight as he considers the possibilities inherent in what Andromeda is saying. So if he continues to *study* the Dark Arts, he should be safe…he merely has to practice care when actually performing the magic itself.

“Now, Mr. Weasley-Prewett, I wish for you to tell me what it is you seek to gain with this line of questioning,” Andromeda says abruptly. “I know you are no Death Eater, but you refuse to openly commit yourself to either side. What are you hoping to achieve? Are you a spy for the Order? What is the cause of your fascination with the Dark Arts?”

“I cannot say,” he excuses himself. He hadn’t been ready for a direct attack, but to his dismay he can tell that Andromeda will not be put off lightly.

She sets her cup down, this time with an audible clink. “Percy Weasley, I know people like you,” she says, and her magic grows around her until Percy can see for the first time how much Andromeda Black purposefully keeps herself at bay. “I was raised in a cradle of shadows, I was raised to continue my family’s purpose, I flirted with power and I turned it down. You cannot fool me, boy, and I will ask you not to try. *What do you want with Bella?*”

Percy hesitates. “I honestly cannot tell you,” he says, his voice low and intent.

Andromeda narrows her eyes as she contemplates him. “Mr. Weasley-Prewett, do you know what my greatest regret in life has been?”

Percy has absolutely no desire to risk his life in answering that question incorrectly. He suffers the heat of her glare mutely, keeping his lips resolutely shut, until she seems content that she has caused enough agitation.

“I do not regret choosing my husband over my family,” she says, and her voice is suddenly softer, and much more like Tonks’. “I do not regret what brought me my daughter, nor do I regret stepping away from my family when they seemed so clearly poised to fall into darkness.”

Andromeda sighs and takes another delicate sip of tea.

“But what I do regret is allowing my pride to stand in the way of my goals,” she continues, and Percy flinches unconsciously at the ice in her tone. “Narcissa, Bella, Regulus, Sirius; my friends from Slytherin; the network I had access to as a Black heir. I lost all of it, in an instant, because I was too prideful to consider that I entertain two possibilities simultaneously. At the time I thought perhaps the Light side would grow to be my new circle, but they did not trust me, and I was not willing to do what it took to *be* trusted. Not then, and to be quite frank, Mr. Weasley-Prewett, I am not keen on it now.”

Percy cannot help but nod, caught up in the flow of her story. He cannot imagine it would have been easy to be Andromeda Black, a powerful Slytherin witch, married to a Muggleborn Hufflepuff. Too used to power and money and influence to settle down to be a quiet housewife, too prideful and bold to deign to maintain ties with those who judged her for her choices. His own mother had chosen the latter life, and he can admit now, thinking of Andromeda, that for Molly Prewett that must have been equally difficult—and equally necessary.

“I have been watching you, and I see you making the same mistakes as I, though for different reasons.” Percy bristles, but Andromeda holds up a forestalling hand. “Let me tell you what I see. The Dark Lord has returned; we both know this to be true. The Ministry refuses to acknowledge His return, acting out of fear and idiocy. That much is obvious even to the casual observer. Dumbledore has launched a resistance composed entirely of people he can control, such as my cousin, who no longer deigns to speak to me, and my daughter, who believes it to be a great honour to be at the front lines of such a dangerous mission. I have been making discrete inquiries, and though the Dark Lord appears to be in hiding with my sister, he is certainly not inactive. He’s already approached the giants and the werewolves, and I believe he’ll target the goblins next. He’s recruiting heavily; I wouldn’t be surprised if there was another breakout from Azkaban within the month. He’ll be back soon, and He’ll be more powerful than he was before. What’s more, is that you know everything I’m already saying, or at the very least you suspect it, because while you are clearly surprised that at the depth of my knowledge, the expression on your face indicates that none of what I said comes as any shock to you.”

Percy starts and flushes at this last, dropping his eyes to his lap in an attempt to hide how accurate her reading of his thought process had been.

“You are a very powerful wizard. I’ve known you for years, and I’ve always known you to be principled, purposeful, and persistent,” Andromeda continues, her voice sharpening until it feels to Percy like the slimmest of blades. “You know He’s back, and you’re attempting to take action. I cannot believe the son of Arthur and Molly Weasley—not to mention a friend of my daughter—intends to give himself over to the Dark Lord, so the action you wish to take must require inside information about the Dark Lord and His followers, and while you do not wish to be thought of as an enemy by your allies, you very much would like to be considered as an ally by your enemies. I rather think I am correct to posit that your pride is preventing you from better allying with those whose help you need, and your fear is driving your inroads with those whose attention could damn you. So. I know more clearly than most what the Dark Lord’s return may look like, and I do not wish to see it occur in my lifetime. I will swear an Unbreakable Vow to keep your secret unless you give me permission to tell it, or keeping it will bring my daughter or husband to harm. Are those terms acceptable to you?”

For a very long second, Percy has nothing to say. He finishes his tea in a gulp and then sets the cup down, but he still cannot think of how to respond. Andromeda has completely blindsided him.

She rolls her eyes. “You’ll need to be quicker on your feet to tangle with the Dark Lord,” she says dryly. “Ted can be our bonder, and then I’ll ask him to leave the room.”

In what is one of the most surreal moments of Percy’s life, he swears an Unbreakable Vow with Andromeda Tonks. Ted Tonks looks visibly uncomfortable as his wife swears vows in triplicate, but he doesn’t question her when she dismisses him after the bands of light have sunk into both her and Percy’s arms.

“Now,” Andromeda says, as if they had done nothing more than shake hands tightly, “Why do you need to know about Bella?”

Percy doesn’t tell Andromeda everything, of course. He makes no mention of time travel, nor does he use the word *Horcrux*. What he does tell her is that the Dark Lord used an unspeakably Dark ritual to create six objects of great value, ones that will be instrumental if not absolutely essential to defeating him once and for all. He gave one to Abraxas Malfoy, who passed it down to Lucius. He hid one at Hogwarts, and another in the town where he grew up. Two are at unknown locations, but the last, Percy believes, he may have given to Bellatrix Black.

“Everything she had that was accessible was seized when she went to Azkaban,” Andromeda says when Percy is finished, showing absolutely no surprise at information he just shared. “Of course, not much *was* accessible. The Lestrange Manor was raided by the Ministry, but it was a mere shadow of what it had been. Bella was not an idiot; she would not keep her valuables somewhere where they could be stolen. She may have hidden something at Malfoy Manor, but Bella was very jealous of Cissa, so I doubt she did. But of course, I say this only to rule out all options save for the obvious.”

“What is the obvious?” Percy presses impatiently.

Andromeda gives him a faint smile. “What is the vault number of the Weasley vault?”

“1182,” Percy says automatically.

“And the Prewett vault?”

“709.”

“Gringotts vaults are a curious thing,” Andromeda says. “The original bank was built by the first major dynasty of goblins, several centuries ago. There is a finite number of vaults built into the original enchantments, deep beneath the Earth, protected by goblin magic as well as elemental magic. All the rest are built on top in layers of goblin-space, tied to the caverns beneath Gringotts, but not anchored with the same magic.”

Percy is quiet, sensing where this is going, though he burns with impatience for Andromeda to get to the end.

“Your vault number is an indication of your standing in society,” she continues, torturously slowly. “You would not know this, but in families like mine, it is common practice to ask what the lowest vault number a prospective suitor has access to before consenting to marriage. Anything above 800 would never be considered; preferably below 600, or even 400.”

“What is the Black vault number?”

“The main Black vault is 512,” Andromeda says. “Sirius’ vault is 394—as the male Black heir, he would have been given keys to it that could not be revoked even upon his disownment from the family, given that they were signed for in blood. My own is 413. If Sirius hadn’t run away, he would have been given keys to the lowest Black vault, the one with our most precious family treasures, but it went to Bella instead.”

“What is it?” Percy bursts out, unable to wait even a second longer.

“Vault 99,” she says, and her blue eyes are sombre. “On the very first level.”

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He cannot break into Gringotts. The Trio does, somehow—but they also do so at a time where the Ministry is in chaos, the goblins are retreating into their own forces, and an air of lawlessness pervades even the most respectable shop in Diagon Alley. Percy absolutely cannot break into Gringotts now, not when he’s Junior Assistant to the Minister.

Andromeda informs him that nobody except for Bella is authorised to enter, not even her husband, unless accompanied by Bella herself. Upon her death it will be deeded to the next Black heir automatically, regardless of whether she chose another beneficiary in the will. This, he learns, would be Narcissa Malfoy, which would be doable, if somehow Percy could kill Bellatrix Lestrange.

Percy has never killed anyone. Bellatrix provides her own challenges, of course—but even if he were standing in front of a defenceless Muggle, could he kill him? Well, he could probably kill a Muggle if he had to, but a wizard? Percy pushes himself to imagine it, to imagine saying the words to the curse, to see the wizard fall and know definitively that he would never again open his eyes.

That night, Percy goes to the pet shop in Diagon Alley and purchases seven mice.

He starts with *Imperio*. This one comes as easily to him as it did all those years ago, forcing a girl to fetch Tom’s diary. This Tom laughs delightedly when Percy whispers the words and feels the heady, intoxicating power roll gently into him like thunderous waves in an otherwise-calm sea. He forces the mouse to drown itself, and he feels nothing. It takes barely any time at all, and Tom congratulates him lightly. Percy had, on Tom’s request, moved his

portrait so that he would have a better view. Tom feels nearly life sized to Percy, as if they are standing in the same room.

Crucio is harder. Percy has to admit to Tom finally that he does not have a desperate desire to cause pain. Crucio is messy and stressful, and he hates the sound of the mouse squeaking so desperately under his wand. Percy much prefers the clean control of the Imperius, its neat and orderly lines, the way the magic blossoms from his wand and takes on a life of its own, unique to each victim and caster.

“Not all need to inflict pain, I suppose,” Tom says thoughtfully. “There will be other uses for you. But still—it is a shame. I would expect a student of your calibre to master all the spells that are available to you.”

Percy cannot quite work up the courage to try the final Unforgivable. He disposes of the mouse with the same disembowelment curse that Tom taught Abraxas Malfoy and Abraham Nott all those decades prior. That curse Percy absolutely detests; he vanishes the entire mess and has to run to the loo to retch horribly into the toilet.

Tom chuckles. “No stomach for blood,” he says when Percy returns, but Percy snaps out a particularly nasty curse from Lucius’ book that removes all of the blood from the third mouse’s body in a single instance. “Well. I stand corrected. Play to your strengths, Percy. You like clean, efficient spells. Impress me.”

The fourth mouse he kills with a modified de-aging charm. It squeaks its way into childhood and then disappears with a small pop. Tom laughs so hard that he leans against his painted desk until he can breathe again.

“Not very efficient, but I am impressed,” he says finally, still chuckling. “You really ought to use the Killing Curse. It causes no pain; it cannot be blocked; there’s no body parts to deal with; and I think it is rather elegant, really. We do not know exactly why it kills, though I intend to study it when I am back into my form.”

“But you’ve really got to *mean* it, don’t you? Give yourself over to it entirely?”

Tom scoffs. “That’s what Light wizards say to scare you off,” he says dismissively. “You’ve got to have a conviction of purpose. Healers use it all the time to kill patients that are beyond help. It’s like blowing out a candle, really. We make such a fuss about death—but for those whose lives are insignificant, their deaths barely leave a ripple on the world.”

Percy hadn’t known that Healers had ever used the Killing Curse. He looks at his wand and holds it tightly in his hand. The fifth mouse squeaks at him, clearly sensing danger. It is a clean spell, an elegant spell—and if someone is going to die, is it not a mercy to kill them swiftly and painlessly? Percy thinks of the second mouse and shudders delicately. “*Avada Kedavra,*” he says, and the mouse dies.

Just like a candle.

"And again," Tom prompts him, "To solidify your understanding."

His second Killing Curse is precisely the same as the first; no easier, no harder. The sixth mouse dies silently.

“Excellent,” Tom praises him, and his voice is suddenly low and dark and full of honey. “For the last one, let’s do a ritual. It’s a special one that I’ve thought of, just for you.”

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February 1996

Percy resumes his studies of Dark Arts with more vigour, though he looks into Light magic as well, searching in both canons for spells and rituals that are, as Tom says, *clean and efficient*. He kills several more mice; he tells the shopkeeper that he’s a Potions student, and she does not question him any further.

Aside from Tom, he speaks to barely anyone. In fact, his days would be lonely if they weren't so busy. He barely has time to breathe, particularly since Fudge, with the energy of the damned, has decided that he will not go quietly. He tears through the Ministry with frenetic energy, trying to consolidate power, win allies, and generally forestall his inevitable resignation. Fudge often requires Mathilda and Percy to listen quietly as he complains about various backstabbing allies. Percy has become an expert at crafting blandly acerbic comments: just bitter enough to gratify Fudge, but not cruel enough to raise any eyebrows.

Mathilda quits towards the end of February. "An internship with Lucius Malfoy," she says, and Percy cannot stop himself from flicking his eyes to her left arm.

Mathilda smiles at him conspiratorially. "If you're interested, I can put in a good word," she tells Percy in a low tone, though through the sound of Fudge hollering at someone through the Floo, an eavesdropper would be hard-pressed to hear anything else. "We both know Fudge is on his way out. If I have to listen to him call me *dear* one more time, I may break something."

Percy shrugs nonchalantly, as if his colleague offering to introduce him to the Death Eaters did not make his heart race furiously. "Crouch thinks he'll be on his way in next," he says casually. "I'm hoping there'll be an opportunity here for me."

Mathilda taps the side of her nose. "Crouch will be out as swiftly as he’s in, I imagine."

Oh, Merlin, what if Crouch *does* become the Minister, and they've a literal Death Eater running the Ministry? Although doubtless whoever is eventually elected will be either a Death Eater or Imperiused, so he supposes it does not really matter.

Percy tries to look as if the thought does not bother him. "By then I may be asking for your good word," he says with a light laugh.

Mathilda grins and returns to packing her things in a small box.

That afternoon, Tonks attempts to kidnap Percy, grabbing his arm as he makes for the cafeteria and steering him out the door, where she promptly changes her appearance to be that of a much older woman. It's chilly and rainy and so nobody else is outside. Percy mutters a warming charm and glares at Tonks.

"What are you *doing*," she hisses at him furiously.

"What are you doing, you absolute maniac," Percy hisses back, untangling himself from her iron grip.

"I know you're not a Death Eater in training, but to hear people talk, I'm the only one."

Percy pauses. "People are talking about me?"

Tonks gives him a solid smack. "Percy! This is serious! Your own family—well, people are gossiping, Percy."

Your own family, Percy repeats in his head, his face souring.

"Percy, *what are you doing?"*

"Dumbledore doesn't want me in his blasted Order," Percy whispers angrily, despite the fact that they both had thrown up privacy wards. "I'm not going to ask him again, so don't even suggest that, Tonks. And things are *happening* while the Order is off doing who know what. I'm learning things, Tonks, and I won't learn those things if people think I'm some sort of Muggle lover."

"So be a spy for the Order!"

"Isn't that what you are, or my father? How is that working out for you?"

"So tell Dumbledore you have information that he can't get with your father or I! Merlin's saggy tit, Percy, you're a real idiot. Is this about your *pride*?"

Percy flushes hotly at the derisive tone in her voice, so unlike the cool empathy of her mother's. "So what if it is? Am I not allowed to have pride? I'm not working with Dumbledore, Tonks, and it's not by choice. He didn't *want* me, Tonks."

"So tell me," she says urgently. "I'll keep it a secret. But this isn't a game, Perce. Your father almost died!"

"And where was his precious Order? Arriving only in time to cart his bleeding body to St. Mungo's!"

"And he *lived* because of it, you dunce!"

Percy and Tonks stare at each other, breathing heavily. Although everything about Tonks looks different than normal, the spark in her eyes is still so characteristic of her that Percy can ignore her altered appearance.

“You’re scaring me, Percy,” she says finally. “I don’t like to be wrong about people, but it seems like I’ve been wrong about you.”

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The knowledge that Barty Crouch, Jr. is a literal Death Eater makes Percy feel sick to the stomach with guilt and anxiety every time he thinks of it, but it *does* make a few things rather more clear.

Mr. Crouch, Sr. must still be alive, given that it’s impossible to make Polyjuice from samples of a dead person. Percy is not sure if he’ll be able to rescue Mr. Crouch, but it does bear considering. It explains the odd magical result at the Crouch residence as well; Barty must be staying somewhere else, perhaps with the Dark Lord himself, though his father and Winky are trapped inside the house.

Percy does not have any proof, but he has a suspicion that Barty is the one who murdered Amos as well. Barty seems to be more focused on creatures than Percy would expect, given most wizards barely think of creatures when making plans. He can’t say it’s a bad plan, either; in the first timeline, the Dark Lord had won the allegiance of most of the werewolves, Dementors, and giants, but the other creatures—centaurs, most notably—remained somewhat neutral. Many of the creatures have natural powers in Dark magic. Percy shudders to think of what could happen if more creatures were swayed to follow the Dark Lord.

Percy does not entirely trust the mail, but he begins to put together a docket of his own research, his own conclusions, to be presented to whatever member of the Order or Ministry seems the most trustworthy. The creatures are not a monolith; even if one werewolf clan falls in with the Dark Lord, it hardly means all of them will, or that hags will follow suit, or trolls, and Percy’s research has shown him that all creatures have some form of society and some way to be bribed. He’d ideally like to present his work to Tonks, given her proximity to the Order’s pet werewolf, and her status as an Auror, but he hardly ever sees Tonks anymore, and can’t think of a way to slip her the packet without her confronting him for an explanation.

Percy *knows*, logically, he should avoid Barty at all costs—but he finds it dreadfully difficult not to pry. Crouch is a Death Eater, and whatever keeps him from the Dark Lord’s side likely will not last long. But Crouch is a *real* Death Eater, and he’s so willing to talk, and Percy sometimes imagines himself writing to his parents triumphantly with a key piece of information that will save dozens of lives. At the very least, he’d like something to bring back to Snape.

The issue, Percy soon learns, is that Crouch is not particularly knowledgeable about what the Dark Lord is doing presently. But he has a wealth of information about the events of the last year, and it is from Crouch that Percy learns all about Voldemort’s journey from shade to body.

How Pettigrew managed to find Voldemort, why Pettigrew contacted *Crouch*, of all people, and how the two of them managed to resurrect the Dark Lord with only the Dark Lord's wand between them—the tale is, honestly, unbelievable. And *Pettigrew*, of all people, capable of the magic to bring back the Dark Lord!

Barty seems to be in contact with the Dark Lord, at least nominally. In fact, Barty reveals to Percy with no small amount of pride, the Dark Lord himself has given Barty a new task, a special task, one of the utmost importance.

"There's something hidden, in the Department of Mysteries," whispers Barty, leaning over the cooling remnants of his coffee with exaggerated subterfuge. Percy conceals a flinch as Barty's stale breath wafts over him, seeking to widen his eyes in admiration instead. "And he wants *me* to dismantle the wards."

"But the Department of Mysteries must be heavily protected," objects Percy. "And the Order —why, the Order must be guarding it, Barty. That's what my father must have been doing!"

Barty nods, a small, smug smile crossing his father's thin lips. "Rookwood seems to think *he'll* be able to solve it first. He used to be an Unspeakable, you know. But there was that whole mess with Avery…the Dark Lord told me about it personally."

Avery, as it turns out, had told the Dark Lord that any Unspeakable could help broach the wards around the Department of Mysteries, and Lucius had Imperiused Broderick Bode to try and break in. Percy thinks of Bode in the bed next to his father and shivers.

"Cursed," confirms Barty, shaking his head. "Avery's in the doghouse, though Rookwood maintains that he'd known all along that he'd known what would happen. Rookwood hates Avery, so I'm convinced he kept his mouth shut so that Avery would get hung out to dry."

When Percy tells a highly edited version of this story to Landon, Landon frowns and shakes his head. "Anyone can enter the Department of Mysteries," he says, "Provided you are a registered guest of the Ministry. It's the Department of Mysteries but it's not a *secret*."

"So if I, hypothetically, Imperiused an Unspeakable, what in the Department of Mysteries would cause them irreparable harm?"

Landon thinks about this, swirling his spoon absently in his tea cup. Landon looks tired, as they all do, but tired in a normal, academic sort of way, as if his apprenticeship is so engaging that it occupies all of his time and then some. Percy is envious; *his* exhaustion, if anyone were to look closely, seems to be quite obviously due to living in a sustained period of panic and anxiety, with a Dark Lord hanging on his wall and a Death Eater overseeing his progress at work.

"There are rooms with artefacts of Death," Landon says finally, slowly, ruminating over each word. "But those would kill you, not hurt you. There are some rooms with things that may drive you mad. But nothing is very heavily warded, nothing except the Hall of Prophecy."

Percy hadn't known that only the subject of a prophecy may fetch a prophecy, but he supposes that explains why the Dark Lord hasn't already come to retrieve his prize. Still,

though, the whole affair seems odd to Percy, who feels like the Dark Lord would be very capable of infiltrating the Ministry without much trouble. Perhaps the prophecy is lower on his priority list than the Order seems to think, or the Dark Lord is still too weak to travel.

February slips into March without Barty giving anything else of interest up, though Tom does enjoy hearing the story of how Barty brought the Dark Lord back to life. Tom seems to relish in descriptions of the Dark Lord's misfortunes, as if they are proof that he and he alone is a superior portion of his soul.

"At least they found my wand," Tom mutters. "But I cannot imagine why it took them *so long* to return me to my form."

"I think they wanted Potter's blood."

"But *why*," Tom insists, narrowing his eyes. "What is Potter's power?"

"Nobody really knows," Percy admits. "And he's not the brightest wizard, to be honest. Perhaps it was just luck, although as I said, I've heard it told that his mother laid a powerful blood ward to protect him."

"But to protect him against the Killing Curse? If all it took was a blood ward, no Dark wizard would ever allow himself to die from the curse," Tom argues, quite reasonably.

"Well, there is a prophecy that states a boy born at the end of July *shall have power the Dark Lord knows not*," Percy says carefully. He thinks it is likely Tom will learn of the prophecy, and so he figures it is better that Tom hear it from him, so that Tom cannot accuse him of keeping secrets later on. (Percy does many calculations of this matter, late at night in bed, when he inevitably cannot sleep). "But he seems to be a rather normal fifteen year old boy. He certainly does not compare to you, my Lord."

"Nobody compares to me," Tom says dismissively, his eyes narrowed. "*Power the Dark Lord knows not.* There is no power that I do not know."

"His mother was a Mudblood," Percy offers. "And his father a powerful Light wizard. Perhaps they have some sort of family magic that you have never encountered."

Tom ignores him, tapping one finger meditatively on his lips as he thinks. "*Power the Dark Lord knows not*. It cannot be blood magic—I know everything there is to know about blood magic. Perhaps there is some obscure branch of Light magic, but all the Light magic I encountered was decidedly inferior to its Dark counterpart. If there was a prophecy, perhaps Dumbledore knew of it, and enchanted the boy…"

It is an interesting question, and struck by Tom's interest, Percy spends several days researching blood wards to try and determine what, precisely, it was that Lily Potter could have cast over her infant son. The problem is as Tom says: if all it took was a mother's love to save a child, would not dozens of children still be alive?

And Harry has such an *odd* connection with Tom, too. Tom learns that Harry speaks Parseltongue and spends the rest of the week in what can only be described as a sulk, before

emerging and demanding that Percy research the Potter bloodline thoroughly. They cannot find any sort of relationship to the Slytherin line. Tom even goes as far to posit that Lily Potter may have been the child of an exiled squib, which Percy actually thinks could be fairly plausible, given what he's heard of her brilliance.

There clearly, undeniably, are differences in blood. "If you enchant something with your blood, another person cannot access it," Percy muses, late one night, raising his head from Lucius' thick tome. Tom, who never seems to sleep, raises his head from his writing in interest. "And, you can enchant something against Mudbloods, can't you?"

"Most certainly," Tom agrees. "And Muggles."

"What about half-bloods? Is it merely a binary?"

"I never tried, nor encountered a curse specifically for half-bloods."

"But maybe they are enchanting based on blood, literal blood, rather than blood *status*," Percy reasons. "All purebloods are related, if you go back far enough in our trees, and so logic would suggest the same for half-bloods as well. Only Mudbloods are new blood."

"Asfoten suggests that magic is transmitted via blood," Tom says, instantly ready for a discussion. That is something Percy can say he honestly admires about the Dark Lord: his grasp of theory and breadth of expertise, not to mention his recall of minute detail, is extraordinary.

Percy shakes his head. "I suppose," he says doubtfully. It feels as though the answer is hovering just outside of reach, like mist around his head, waiting for him to convalesce it into a form. "I think magic is connected with your soul."

Tom raises an eyebrow. "Go on."

"Squibs share their blood with their magical siblings," Percy points out. "Mudbloods share blood with Muggles."

"So what would designate a soul?" Tom challenges. "Why would one sibling be inferior?"

Percy does not have an answer for that. He props his chin on his hand as he thinks it over. "Souls have strength," he says finally. "Tenor. Even form. It stands to reason that there would be minute differences, aberrations, even between families. I mean, Tom, we know that you intended to make *six* Horcruxes. A man with a weaker soul never would have been able to manage that burden."

Tom taps his quill against his painted lips. "True. But one wonders if the strength of a wizard is powered by the strength of his soul, or the strength of his soul is determined by the strength of his *magic*."

Percy wonders how many times he could split *his* soul without going mad.

The only other point of interest in February comes when Percy hears from Cedric that Rita Skeeter of all people has published an *in-depth* outline of what happened in the graveyard in

the *Quibbler*.

Truly, the mind boggles. Percy purchases an issue of the Quibbler for the first and likely last time in his life, searching through his memory to see if Harry had taken such a reckless action in the first timeline. He vaguely remembers that Harry had given a contentious interview; Fudge had been incensed, and there had been a speech the next day that went out of its way to paint Harry as a deranged liar, but Percy had never actually read the article in question, and he certainly hadn't realised that Rita Skeeter was the author of it. Even in this timeline, Percy asks around casually and determines that most people haven't yet heard the article was published at all, given that the Quibbler must have an average readership of approximately twenty delusional wizards. Percy doesn't know how the Lovegood family eeks out a living on the rag, but perhaps they have family money to fall back on. Certainly they only live in Ottery St. Catchpole, so they can't be tremendously wealthy.

Regardless, the article itself is—excruciatingly detailed. Percy reads it with his heart in his throat. He can imagine every second: the dark graveyard with the grand manor looming ominously over the hill; the ring of white-masked hooded Death Eaters among the large grey gravestones; the black cauldron, bubbling, as Pettigrew steels himself and slices his hand off without a flinch; and the Dark Lord as Percy remembers him in his nightmares, his frightening snake-like visage and high, cruel voice.

That Harry actually duelled the Dark Lord, to some extent, and escaped…

That Harry *named names*, from Lucius Malfoy to the Goyle family and beyond…

That Harry's wand had connected with Voldemort's and spawned ghosts of his past…

Percy cannot believe it. He absolutely cannot believe it. He cannot believe it all happened as Harry says, and he can't believe that Harry would *tell the world* exactly what happened. What was the advantage? If Harry had been serious about telling his story, wouldn't he choose a magazine other than the Quibbler? Although Rita Skeeter had written the article, and she'd been awfully quiet lately, perhaps verifying the details of Harry's tale before publishing it?

Percy's nightmares for the next few weeks are filled with Little Hangleton, the moan and creak of the trees overhead, the green flash of Voldemort's wand, the hard glint in Tom's eyes. Each time he wakes, his heart pounding, to find his body covered in a thin layer of sweat, all of his sheets thrown in a tangle to the floor.

This time he writes a letter to Hermione, figuring it is more likely that she is responsible for this article than Harry, in which he cautions her to think of her future. That seems like the safest line for Percy to take, the most defensible: *think of how your actions will impact you after you leave Hogwarts.* Hermione of all of them will have a target on her head, but she, unlike Ron, won't have a wizarding family to turn to for help. He hopes she will think more critically about her actions, or at least the fallout from them.

(Umbridge appears in the Minister's office swelled with indignation. Fudge takes one look at her and launches into an attack of his own, demanding to know why Umbridge cannot control her students despite the *multitude* of special powers granted to her. Percy tries to keep his head down, but he's next, and Umbridge *doses him with Veritaserum* to see if he knew of

Harry's plan to contact Rita Skeeter. Luckily, Percy hadn't even remembered about the article, so he truthfully says that he hadn't had inkling that Harry, Ron, or Hermione was planning such an action, and even more luckily, Umbridge is too incensed to ask him anything else of consequence, but the ease with which she slipped a potion into his tea rattles him, and he resolves to improve his detection of undetectable potions. First the Polyjuice, and now Veritaserum; what's next, a poison?

Still. The entire experience rattles him. It seems to be obvious to both parties that he is in the centre of whatever Harry is planning, or the Death Eaters. For Umbridge to attack him so openly at the Ministry; for him to be such a target that Barty regularly questions him on the Order's doings; for everyone, even Tonks, to believe so readily the worst of him…how could he even *think* of maintaining this delicate balancing act? He's going to fall, and soon, and the worst part is he'll feel himself falling and be unable to cast a Levitation charm before he smashes into the floor below).

The rest of March passes in a flurry of Decrees. Fudge hovers on the brink of declaring martial law—which would give him the absolute power he craves but also require him to admit the unrest spreading through the country qualifies as a basis for martial law—and Percy gratefully takes the excuse to spend as little time as possible in the vicinity of Barty Crouch. As a result, Percy drafts several of the Decrees that are swiftly passed on Umbridge's orders, but also several that spread quietly among the Ministry like mould during a wet summer.

Percy does not know whether Fudge is taking cues from Umbridge or Umbridge is co-opting a Ministry playbook for use in Hogwarts, but just as she creates a small squad of student-authority figures, so does Fudge create a special division of Aurors who report to him directly. Just as she targets the professors, so does he begin cleaning the ranks, putting Heads of departments on probation and instigating investigations into their activities. His power grows, and with it, the rumours and mutters of discontent.

It all comes to a head one afternoon when Percy, alone in the office for once, is correcting the grammar on one of Fudge's planned speeches. He has tea and even a slice of pumpkin bread from the cafeteria, and since he's moved all his extraneous things to Mathilda's desk, he finally does not feel cramped and claustrophobic.

Fudge comes crashing through the door, destroying any hint of serenity that Percy managed to claw from the grasps of his miserable life. His eyes are bright and excited, and he throws his gaze wildly around the room before settling on Percy. "Come, come, Weasley," he gasps out. "Dawlish and Shacklebolt are on their way."

"Where are we going, sir?"

"We'll need a record," Fudge says, summoning a bundle of parchment and ink and pressing it into Percy's hands. "Take note of everything. It may even go to trial."

"Where are we going?" Percy repeats, but he gets his answer only when Fudge drags him to his private Floo and throws in a handful of Floo powder.

Hogwarts, of course.

Percy has only a blurry memory of this day from the first timeline; he remembers only that Dumbledore managed to escape, and Fudge had been furious for weeks. Percy had been in the middle of a prolonged bout of misery, and the rivalry between Fudge and Dumbledore had been unpleasant to dwell on for several reasons, none of which he'd wanted to admit to at the time. He steps out of the Floo and into Dumbledore's office. Dawlish and Shacklebolt are already there.

"Mr. Weasley," says Professor McGonagall coolly. Percy flinches, but Dumbledore does not even give Percy a passing glance, choosing instead to stare down Fudge.

"We've got you this time, Albus," Fudge exclaims delightedly. "Weasley, get ready to write."

Percy does not point out that they could always use a Pensieve memory for evidence and instead readies himself to take notes, setting the quill and parchment to hover expectantly in the air. He can't remember this scene well enough to try and manipulate it in some way; he'll have to remain quiet and obedient, just as he would have been the first time.

The door opens and Umbridge appears, propelling Harry in front of him. Harry wrenches himself away from her grip as soon as he's through the door, but the sight of all the adult wizards in the room seems to pull him up short.

"Well, well, well," Fudge says, glaring at Harry. Harry lifts his chin and glares right back.

"He was heading back to Gryffindor Tower," Umbridge reports, her eyes alight with excitement. "The Malfoy boy cornered him."

"Did he?" Fudge asks appreciatively. "Weasley, remind me to tell Lucius, won't you?" Percy obediently scratches out a note to inform Lucius Malfoy, flinching away from Harry's glare. "Well, Potter. I expect you know why you are here?"

Harry hesitates. "No," he says finally, his eyes on Dumbledore.

Percy looks at Dumbledore too, but his face is smooth.

Fudge and Umbridge interrogate Harry, who flatly denies that he's broken any school rules. Percy records it obediently, watching Dumbledore with narrowed eyes as he fails to make eye contact with anyone at all. What is he looking at, waiting for? Why won't he look at Harry?

Percy refocuses when Umbridge brings in a young, curly-haired girl, hiding her face in her hands. It's the Edgecombe girl. Percy remembers her mother; she's a cruel, thin-faced woman who takes tremendous pleasure in setting up a system of monitoring charms for the Floo network after the Death Eaters take over the Ministry. She raises her head and Fudge yelps in shock. Even Percy flinches. The purple pustules on her face—SNEAK—are large and inflamed and look horribly painful.

"Never mind the spots now, dear," Umbridge says harshly over the girl's sobs.

"*Enechefortula*," Percy says before he can stop himself. All attention swings to him, and he gestures weakly at the girl's face. "*Enechefortula*. Tell Madam Pomfrey. It should break

through the Transfiguration and allow her to heal the spots as if they were...pimples."

The girl's face is full of shocked relief. McGonagall sniffs from Harry's side and Percy gives her a questioning look. She surely would not consent to have a student disfigured by a curse she could easily reverse, merely because of the student's political associations?

"Ignore the spots," Umbridge hisses, more forcefully. She exhales and turns to the Minister when Edgecombe seems unwilling to speak. "I'll tell the story, then."

Harry Potter has been using the Room of Requirement to train an illegal underage army of wizards. Fudge inhales in heady joy; it's his dream come true. His obvious glee at the situation isn't diminished by Dumbledore's obfuscation, claiming first that they had not done anything illegal, and then that there had been no subsequent meetings. Percy begins to sweat, quietly and unobtrusively in the corner. He hopes to Merlin that his name hasn't been included in their notes, nor Cedric's.

"Do you have any evidence that any such meetings continued?" Dumbledore asks pointedly, and out of the corner of his eye Percy watches as Shacklebolt, future Minister of Magic and most certainly a member of the Order of the Phoenix, curses a key witness.

He looks up and meets Percy's shocked eyes. Slowly, deliberately, Shacklebolt winks.

"I'm asking whether you've been going to these meetings for the past six months? You have, haven't you?" Umbridge asks the girl for the second or third time. Edgecombe hesitates and then shakes her head. Imperius, or a mere Confounding Charm? "What do you mean by shaking your head?" Umbridge demands.

"I would have thought her meaning was quite clear," says McGonagall testily. "There have been no secret meetings for the past six months. Is that correct, Miss Edgecombe?"

Edgecombe nods obediently. Imperius, Percy decides. And McGonagall must know. Surely she must know. They just cast an Unforgivable curse on a student so that Harry Potter cannot be punished for legitimately breaking the rules. Unbelievable! As much as Percy dislikes Fudge, he cannot help but feel a frisson of pity for the man as he begins to run against the immovable wall that is the will of Albus Dumbledore.

Even when Umbridge provides a list of every participating student, helpfully labelled with *Dumbledore's Army,* Dumbledore seems remarkably unconcerned, as if she'd written it herself. Would he have protected any student, if Fred or George had started the club, or even if Ron or Hermione? What if Draco Malfoy had wanted to learn defensive magic? Any other student would have been expelled, if not sent to Azkaban, but not Harry Potter. Percy looks at the list and grimances; he'll need to have words with Cedric. Merlin's beard.

"Dumbledore's Army," Fudge says quietly. He looks at Dumbledore and brandishes the list. "*Dumbledore's Army* Albus."

Dumbledore takes the list from Fudge and looks at it for a very long moment. "Well, the game is up," he says finally. "Would you like a written confession from me, Cornelius—or will a statement before these witnesses suffice?"

Percy starts and begins scribbling down a summary of what had been said so far. His heart isn't in it, though, the shock of seeing Albus Dumbledore willing to sacrifice himself for a boy overwhelming him. Of course, Dumbledore has no intention of going to prison, but that he even claims credit for the idea is remarkable. Shacklebolt and McGonagall exchange a look, and even the normally stoic Dawlish looks shocked.

"You've been plotting against me," Fudge yells, and Dumbledore says, as pleasantly as he pleases,

"That's right."

"NO!" Harry's shout takes them all by surprise. Percy would have been willing to bet that Fudge had forgotten Harry was even there.

So Harry figured it out too, and doesn't want Dumbledore to sacrifice himself. *Too late*, Percy tells Harry in his head. *Dumbledore will sacrifice whatever he needs to have you succeed at a task you've not even been set.*

"Be quiet, Harry, or I am afraid you will have to leave my office."

"Yes, shut up, Potter," barks Fudge, who looks as if he's imagining the sight of Dumbledore in chains. "Well, well, well. I came here tonight expecting to expel Potter and instead—"

"Instead you get to arrest me. It's like losing a Knut and finding a Galleon, isn't it?"

Fudge, blind to the mockery in Dumbledore's tone, turns to Percy in great excitement. "Weasley! You've written it all down, his confession, everything he said?"

"Yes, sir," Percy says obediently. It doesn't matter. These notes will never be seen by anyone.

"All of it? The bit about how he's building an army against the Ministry, how he's been destabilising me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, well. Send a copy to the *Daily Prophet*, Weasley. If we send a fast owl we should make the morning edition!"

Percy nods obediently but makes no move to dash from the room, as he vaguely remembers doing the first time. He's going to see this through. Fudge gives him an irritated glance but the reward of arresting Dumbledore is too valuable for him to waste time chastising Percy. Instead, he turns to Dumbledore.

"You will now be escorted back to the Ministry," Fudge says, his voice quivering with triumph. "Where you will be formally charmed, then sent to Azkaban to await trial!"

"Ah," Dumbledore says, his eyes twinkling. "I thought we might hit that little snag."

Fudge seems to barely be listening to what Dumbledore is saying, imagining, likely, tomorrow's *Prophet.*

“Well—it’s just that you seem to be labouring under the delusion that I am going to...what is the phrase? *Come quietly*,” Dumbledore says gently, and despite himself Percy has to hide a smile at the expression on Fudge’s face.

Dawlish, quiet until now, steps forward, reaching for his wand.

“Don’t be silly, Dawlish,” says Dumbledore. “I’m sure you are an excellent Auror—I seem to remember you achieved Outstandings in all your NEWTs—but if you attempt to, er, bring me in by force, I will have to hurt you.”

Dawlish, for all his Outstandings, handles being threatened by Albus Dumbledore with surprising grace. He blinks and looks at Fudge, his expression quite clearly saying that his loyalty does not extend to risking his own life unless explicitly ordered to do so. Percy has to hide a smirk despite himself.

Fudge takes out his own wand and hollers a command, but with a flash and a bang of light, Dumbledore acts more quickly. Percy, who had raised a protective shield the second he stepped into the office, escapes being Stunned, but Dawlish, Umbridge, Fudge, and even Shacklebolt lay motionless on the floor.

“Nice shield,” compliments Dumbledore, and Percy starts, staring at him with wide eyes. He’d missed this entire thing last time, and Fudge had been very quiet about how Dumbledore had escaped their clutches. “You understand, of course, I will have to hex you as well.”

“I’ll do it at the end,” says Percy defiantly, gripping his wand.

Dumbledore smiles to himself. “One day, Mr. Weasley, we will have to chat, just the two of us. I think the story you have to tell will be rather remarkable. Now, Minerva, you’ll take care of things here? They will awaken soon—act as though no time has passed, they should not remember.”

McGonagall glances at Percy and then asks Dumbledore, “Where will you go?”

“I will not go into hiding,” Dumbledore says gently. “I have much to do, Minerva, many mysteries to solve.”

“Professor Dumbledore—” Harry interjects.

Dumbledore leans forward, staring intently at Harry. “Listen to me,” he says softly, urgently. Percy can barely hear what he is saying. “You *must* study Occlumency as hard as you can, do you understand me? Do everything Professor Snape tells you and practise it, particularly every night before sleeping so that you can close your mind to bad dreams. You will understand why soon enough, but you must promise me.”

Dawlish moans. Dumbledore clutches at Harry’s wrist.

“Close your mind,” he whispers intently, and Harry’s face spasms, as if in pain. Dumbledore releases him and reaches for Fawkes, disappearing in a flash of golden light.

“Where is he?” Fudge yells, blinking against the lingering flashes of light. “Where did he go?”

“I don’t know!” Shacklebolt shouts, leaping to his feat. Percy rubs his temples, avoiding everyone’s gaze. He has too much to think about. The rest of them seem to have forgotten him, anyway; Umbridge and the Aurors tear out the door as if Dumbledore may have been hiding just outside.

Fudge moves more slowly. “I’m afraid this is the end of Albus,” he says quietly to McGonagall, who responds with scorn. Fudge’s face hardens. “This need not be the end of you, Minerva. Weasley, come.”

“I’d like to check on my brothers, sir,” Percy says. “They need a stern talking to, sir.”

Fudge laughs bitterly. “The whole bloody school needs a stern talking to, it seems.”

He moves slowly down the stairs. For a second, there’s silence in the office, and then McGonagall shakes her head.

“We will talk, Mr. Weasley,” she says, looking at him pointedly. “I think you understand why.”

Percy nods silently.

“Take Mr. Potter back to Gryffindor Tower. You may use my Floo to leave once you have finished speaking to your brothers. I will escort Miss Edgecombe back to Ravenclaw Tower.”

Harry looks as shocked as Percy feels. He doesn’t object as Percy leads him through the halls.

“Percy,” he says suddenly. “What's going to happen to Dumbledore?"

"Nothing," Percy says confidently with the assurance of the future. "Fudge will be too embarrassed to do anything formally. He'll realise soon that to publish anything about Dumbledore's Army would be foolish. Speaking of—Harry, that was extremely reckless of you."

Harry flushes angrily. "We need to learn to protect ourselves!"

"Not that," Percy says, waving a hand. "I’ve known about that for months. Who do you think contributed to your lesson plans? Cedric and I have been talking about the club since the beginning. But Harry, someone is *always watching*. Learn some privacy charms. Don't hold illicit meetings in a quiet pub, particularly if you're an underage wizard. Don't write the names of all of your associates on a piece of parchment and label it *Dumbledore's Army.* "

Harry flushes again, but presumably this time in embarrassment.

"And Harry—" Percy hesitates. "I learned Occlumency, you know. I don't know how Snape is teaching you, but I imagine it's not going particularly well. There are books, meditative exercises, even Potions you can brew to help put you in the mood. You must be able to relax,

to allow your magic to guard your secrets, to force your thoughts to take tangible form. It's like the Patronus, or being an Animagus."

"Snape just tells me to clear my mind," Harry says dryly.

Very likely Snape does not want the Dark Lord seeing him tutoring Harry well in his mind. For that matter, neither does Percy.

"So learn otherwise, Harry! You've never been one to apply yourself to your schoolwork, but you're no idiot! Use the library. And tell Ron and Hermione to learn Occlumency too. And Fred and George."

"Why do they need to learn it?"

"Harry," Percy says very intently. "Think about what you know—what all of you know. That information is currency, do you understand? If someone were to capture you, or Ron, or any of them, they could tear your memories from your mind. They could learn what you're planning, what you've overheard. They can tell when you're lying. If you're so confident that He is back, then act like it, and start preparing for a *war,* not a schoolboy battle."

Harry looks up mulishly at Percy, his jaw set, likely ready to argue that he *is* preparing for a war. Then he sighs and seems to deflate. Percy lets him walk off; any more advice and he risks drawing far too much attention to himself.

Before he returns to McGonagall's office, he remembers his promise to Narcissa and seeks out Draco Malfoy with the help of a few *Point Me* charms. Draco is improbably outside Myrtle's bathroom, staring at the wall where he once laughed at the sight of words written in dripping blood.

"Weasley?"

"Percy," he reminds Draco, who lowers his wand. "You should really verify my identity, you know. I visited you in the hospital wing once to tell you to take Arithmancy and Ancient Runes."

Draco rolls his eyes. "Why are you here?"

"I'm sure you know," he says. He nods toward Draco's shining badge. "Your father will be pleased to hear of your—initiative."

Draco smirks but it seems to be an empty gesture. He looks tired, much more tired and wan than Harry from minutes ago. Percy does not want to *save* Draco Malfoy, but he does owe Narcissa at least an attempt to check on him. And he does feel bad for the kid, really. Harry is fifteen and allowed to rage and break the rules and do illegal magic outside of school and whatever other nonsense he gets up to while processing the burden of being the Chosen One. Draco Malfoy has the Dark Lord living in his *house* and he's not allowed to succumb to the brand on his skin. When does he get Marked, this summer?

Percy understands not having choices. He understands having to choose between your family and your desires. He understands not having the conviction that whatever choice you make is correct.

“What do you want, Weasley?” Draco responds irritably.

Percy flicks his eyes around the corridor and then motions with his head toward Myrtle’s bathroom. “Can we talk, Draco?”

Draco looks like he’s considering refusing, but Percy gives him a look, and Draco rolls his eyes again and follows Percy into the bathroom. “Is this where you hung out in school?”

“Percy!” Myrtle says delightedly, swooping down to greet him. Draco snorts, and Percy gives him a quelling look.

“Myrtle, this is Draco Malfoy,” he says, presenting her. Myrtle flourishes a courtly curtsey, and Draco unenthusiastically bows his head back. “Can you give us some privacy?”

“I’ll guard the corridor,” she says, though Percy knows perfectly well she will eavesdrop the second she’s out of sight.

Regardless, he turns to Draco once they are alone. Draco *is* going back to the belly of the beast in just a few months, but at the same time, Percy can’t just leave him without any sort of warning or support.

“Do you know Occlumency?”

Draco blinks, and then something in his gaze sharpens. “Not particularly well.”

“Learn,” Percy advises. “Before the summer. I used to practise with Myrtle. She can’t do it, obviously, but she can help you with the exercises.”

“With a *ghost*?”

“Ghosts make good friends,” Percy says defensively. “Or at least, Myrtle is a good friend. She’ll keep your secrets, and she’ll never judge. She’s very easy to talk to.”

Draco raises an eyebrow but does not comment. “Why do I need to learn Occlumency?”

“Draco, do you know who is in your house right now?”

Draco’s face closes instantly, his casually derisive expression wiped clean and replaced by a blank hostility. Percy takes this to mean a yes.

“A lot is changing,” Percy says carefully. The trick is to speak between the lines, so if someone viewed the memory they would not automatically assume Percy is a traitor to either side. “A lot has already changed, in fact. We’re young, Draco, and our parents are making choices for us that we don’t necessarily want—or need—them to make.” He worries his lip while he thinks about what he wants to say.

“Maybe your blood traitor parents,” snaps Draco.

“Certainly mine,” Percy concedes. He doesn’t know whether Draco willingly signed up for the cause or whether he’s coerced, but either way, he knows—or Harry says—he comes to regret it. “Listen, Draco. I just want you to know that you can talk to me, or Tonks if that’s easier. I am not my parents, and you’re not yours.”

Draco snorts and crosses his arms. In the pale and watery light of the bathroom he looks so young and tired. “I don’t know what I could possibly want to talk to you about.”

“Maybe nothing, but if you do want you, you can always owl me or Tonks. Neither of us are reflections of our parents. I understand the choices you may have to make, and I’m not going to talk you out of them. I’ll just listen.” Percy gives him the smallest of smiles. “I promise I won’t even give advice.”

“Weasley, I barely know you, and even I know that’s impossible,” Draco bites back, but it lacks rancour. Percy does not know exactly what he could do for Draco, but Draco is only a boy, after all. Percy imagines the worst case scenario is that he’ll need someone to talk to over the coming year. His worst offence in the prior timeline seemed to be letting Death Eaters into Hogwarts, but nobody save Dumbledore even died.

Myrtle waits only seconds after Draco leaves before materialising in the corner. “What was *that* about,” she says delightedly, batting her eyelashes at him. “Making friends?”

“Well, the Dark Lord *is* living in his house, with his mother,” Percy responds dryly. “If anyone could use a friend, it would be him.”

“Are you going to save people from their horrid fates?” Myrtle hovers just in front of his nose. “Oh, please, Percy, let’s. We’ll be heroes. Maybe we’ll even get an Order of Merlin.”

“We will not,” he scoffs. “And anyway, I wouldn’t even know who to save.”

So many Muggleborns die—so many that Percy cannot even imagine who would be left for his five year reunion. Halfbloods died, too, and blood traitors, and even Slytherins too slow or too hesitant to say *my Lord* when bidden. Parents and children and those without either.

“And we’d need an intelligence system of some sort,” he continues after a beat. “Houses to send them, supplies to hand out. An incredible amount of gold, really. Maybe fake wands and food...certainly potions. It’s too bad you can’t brew potions by yourself, Myrtle.”

He looks up to find Myrtle watching him silently.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she says, her voice soft. “I just missed you.”

“I missed you too,” he says automatically, though it is true. Just being back in Hogwarts makes him feel how utterly alien and cold the outside world can be, how alone he’s felt in his flat tainted with Tom Riddle and the Ministry crawling with Death Eaters. The worst part is

he knows that this is merely a preview of what's to come. If he does not act quickly, the next two years will be unfathomable to anyone who has not lived them before.

"What news from the front?" Myrtle says, giving him a salute. Percy rolls his eyes, though he is relieved Myrtle is playful today instead of sentimental.

"Well, I made my father a life ward so that he wouldn't die after Nagini attacked him for guarding the prophecy about Tom," Percy says all at once. Myrtle splutters, but he doesn't let her interrupt him. "I believe one Horcrux is with Bellatrix Lestrange and one is at this site where Tom grew up. He made it sound like he had not yet made others, though we, of course, cannot be sure."

Myrtle, as usual, zeroes in to the heart of the problem. "Well, Percy, he's probably lying to you," she points out. "Sending you after Bellatrix Lestrange? I've been dead fifty years and even I know that's a horrible idea. I remember her from school. All cruel and haughty and beautiful. Boys trailing after her in the halls, even though she was as likely to curse them as she was to sleep with them."

Percy pauses. "You knew Bellatrix Lestrange?"

"She certainly never came to my bathroom," sniffs Myrtle. "But plenty of other girls did. Girls whose boyfriends were more interested in Bella Black than they ought to be. Girls she'd *hurt*."

"Yes, well," he says, waving that aside. "I found someone that knew Tom as a boy, and he sent me to these great big caves across a dangerous looking ocean. A Horcrux is almost certainly inside, though I don't know which one. Yes, Myrtle—it could be a trap, but what if it isn't?"

"You should take Snape," she says reasonably. "You won't die if you're with Snape."

They'd have to wait until the summer, then—although, secretly, Percy is relieved at the thought of not going back alone to those foreboding hills.

"What's he like? The portrait Tom, I mean."

Percy walks idly over to the sink as he thinks about it. "I can't really tell, to be honest," he says, tracing one thumb over the faucet. "Diary-Tom was so full of personality. He could be cruel, yes, but at least he felt *alive*."

Myrtle and he both pause to acknowledge the terrible irony of what he had just let slip.

"Yes, well, diary-Tom was much younger, and he was the strongest Horcrux, I expect," Myrtle says. "But the portrait doesn't have a personality?"

Percy thinks of portrait Tom, who spends hours reading the painted books in the library or scratching out plans on painted parchment. Then he thinks of Tom teaching him ways to kill mice. "It's like he's waiting to see what personality I expect of him," he says finally. "It feels like he has less of a stake in the game. As if he's not as eager to escape the portrait."

Myrtle frowns as she considers this. “Maybe he’s just smarter than to trust you with his eagerness. Maybe he’s trying to influence you in some other way.”

“But he doesn’t even seem to be trying to manipulate me. I grovel and kneel and call him *my Lord*, but he just sort of smiles. I rage about my parents and he just looks condescending. The only time he seems to really respond to anything I say is when I’m talking about my own plans.”

“He’s not sixteen, Percy,” exclaims Myrtle in frustration. “He’s an adult. He doesn’t care about your problems. He doesn’t want to see you grovel.”

“The Dark Lord wanted everyone to grovel,” Percy argues.

“He’s not the Dark Lord either. He’s just—an older Tom, one that’s not too crazy yet. All he respects is power, Percy, you know that.”

“So maybe I should do more magic in front of him,” says Percy consideringly. “I need to make more gold with the Stone. And I wanted to make those notebooks to converse with Snape.”

“What you need to do is take care of yourself, Percy.”

Percy snorts. Take care of himself—not hardly. What is he meant to do, go for a jog after supper? Eat more vegetables? Stop trying to weasel the truth out of the Dark Lord’s Horcrux?

“I mean it, Percy,” says Myrtle, sternly. “You need friends, or at least allies. It sounds like all you’ve been doing is sitting in your flat talking to Tom, or to Barty Crouch, or to Fudge. You’re going to go mad.”

“Who am I supposed to talk to, Myrtle? You’re all the way here in Hogwarts, and Tonks thinks I’m a Death Eater,” Percy says, cognizant of the whine in his tone but unable to stop it from surfacing. “My own parents hate me, and my brothers aren’t close behind. If I see anyone, Barty bloody Crouch asks me about it the next day.”

“What about your colleagues? Surely you can hang out with them without arousing suspicion.”

Percy thinks of Liam and flinches. “I called one of them a Mudblood,” he admits lowly. He doesn’t have to look up to feel Myrtle’s searing glare. “I just got carried away, I think. I’m sorry, Myrtle.”

“It’s not me you have to apologise to,” Myrtle says sternly. “And Percy, this just proves my point. Calling someone a Mudblood? That’s not like you, and if you’re not careful, you’re going to pretend so hard to be a Death Eater that you wake up one day and become one. Tonks is a Metamorphmagus; surely you two can find a way to meet. And Cedric, Cedric’s *great*. Or some of your old classmates—Landon, or Mariana, or Henry. You’re not alone in the world, Percy.”

“It feels like I am,” he mutters, dragging his gaze down to the rough, stone floors.

“You’re not,” Myrtle says strongly. She pauses and then adds, “Percy, before you came to Hogwarts…I’d been a ghost for fifty years already. I understand being alone. But you reminded me of all the ghosts and portraits in the castle, and you helped me build the confidence to reach back out. You can do the same thing to your friends. And if you don’t have anyone in your life to remind you to act with some common decency and respect, you’re just going to end up like Snape.”

“Don’t let Snape hear you say that,” Percy mutters dryly, refusing to acknowledge the truth of her statement.

“I don’t mean it as an insult,” says Myrtle earnestly. “I’ve been spending a lot of time with Snape, you know. And I’m sad for him. Honestly. I’m trying to be his friend because I don’t think he has anyone else.”

This thoroughly depresses Percy, and he contemplates his future as he skulks around Hogwarts, trying to get to Snape’s office without attracting any attention. Perhaps he and Snape will end up the very same: both hated, both bitter, both without any meaning in their life save their last, urgent mission.

The other man is incredibly bad-tempered, snatching the Map back fro Percy without even a *how do you do*; apparently he has been tasked with teaching Harry Potter Occlumency, due to the seemingly prophetic dreams that Harry has been having about the Dark Lord.

“Why does he have those dreams, sir?” Percy asks cautiously in the middle of an extended rant about Harry’s many failings.

Snape throws him a glance. “It’s something to do with the prophecy, I think,” he says in a much calmer tone than minutes prior. “I do not yet know what, but I *will* find out.”

They fix a date to visit the caves: the second weekend in June. Percy had thought Snape would insist on going sooner, but as Snape points out acerbically, they do not know exactly what will change after the Battle of the Ministry. Percy unfortunately does not know what triggers Harry’s careening flight to the Ministry of Magic, but he does know that Sirius Black dies as a result, which, he tells Snape sternly, is what they could try to avoid.

(Snape mutters a nasty comment about not changing the timeline that Percy ignores).

Aside from what is obvious to them both—that the Dark Lord has grown in strength enough to begin causing havoc in Britain, that Dumbledore may soon be completely ousted by Umbridge, that they are running out of time to strike before the destruction that lies ahead—there is not much to say. Percy debates briefly seeing McGonagall, but after their last chilly exchange, he thinks it safer merely to slink back to the gates of Hogwarts and apparate home. He’ll write to her some other time, when he knows what he should say to her.

He finds Myrtle’s advice is correct: engaging Tom in challenges of magic proves to be more effective than either grovelling or complaining. He explains his desire for an enchanted book with which to write to Snape, and Tom seizes on the diversion eagerly. For the first time Percy thinks of how boring it would be to be a painting. Maybe at Hogwarts, where the halls

teem with portraits to visit and children to spy on, the portraits have enough to do. But Tom seems as trapped in Percy's lonely flat as Percy is himself.

"You don't have the bloodlust of most young pureblood heirs," comments Tom one evening as he instructs Percy on the best way to cast the requisite ink charm on each notebook. For all of magic's many mysteries, some are staggeringly mundane. For words to appear on each book, each book must have an enchanted source of ink. Percy wonders where the ink for Tom's diary is stored, fifty years later, in a dusty vial enchanted to be everlasting.

"I'm sorry?"

"You don't really care about Muggles, or pureblood supremacy, or anything as plebeian as that," Tom explains lightly. "A stronger flick at the end, angled to the left."

Percy tries again on the piece of scrap parchment he's been using to practise. The well of ink near his desk drains and then bursts from within the parchment. He rolls his eyes and siphons it back. "My problem is the incantation," he says musingly. "We don't want the actual *ink* to transfer, at least, not at once. What do I care about then?"

"You like magic. That's all you like, isn't it."

"I like my job," says Percy automatically, though Tom raises an eyebrow at him and he exhales gustily. "Well, I think I *could* like my job, if I had a different job."

A different job at a different Ministry, one ruled not by fools or by murderous madmen. What a world that will be to live in, and he's so *close* he can taste it.

"So you do not—need to be in charge?"

Percy considers this. At one point, he likely would have said yes; he remembers with a twinge of discomfort how intolerable he was about the bloody Head Boy badge, how much it still means to him that he alone was chosen out of all the young wizards at Hogwarts. But in this new timeline, pressed into the shadows, he does not feel as though he needs to be in *charge.* "I want to be in control of myself," he answers slowly, musingly. "Of my own destiny, of my own success, of my own actions. I hate that my family's name can hold me back, or my age, or my wealth, or anything else aside from my own merit. But I do not think I need to be in charge of *others*, as long as they stay out of my way."

"So you could follow another, if you had to," comments Tom lightly, almost incredulously.

Percy takes the question seriously, although of course there's only one answer to give Tom. But to his surprise, and slightly to his discomfort, the answer he gives is true. "I could, if I respected him, and he didn't feel he would stand in the way of my own goals."

"And what if you stood in the way of his goals?"

"I do not think I would," says Percy honestly. He has not spent *too* much time daring to think of what he will do once his task is complete and he is trapped in this timeline for the rest of

his life, but he would not be Percy Weasley if he had not spent *some* time planning for various contingencies. “I’m *tired*, Tom. All I want to do is study magic and keep to myself.”

“Somehow I doubt you would be content with that forever,” replies Tom slyly.

Percy shrugs a shoulder. “True. But for now, some peace and quiet sounds lovely.”

His brothers leave Hogwarts in a blaze of fire and magic that has the entire Wizarding society talking, much to his mother’s chagrin. Percy does not bother to write them. He at least can be assured they will not come to ruin, and if he doesn’t succeed in his task, it will hardly matter, anyway.

Instead, he puts his head down and tries to decide how to murder Bellatrix Lestrange. He’s sure she’s at Malfoy Manor, but Draco doesn’t write to him, and neither does Narcissa. Percy dismisses out of hand any mad plan that requires him to break into Malfoy Manor; he’s not foolish. But maybe he can poison her somehow...convince Draco to slip a vial into her tea…

“What are you plotting?” Tom asks, amusedly. Percy starts and looks up. Tom is lounging in the chair behind his desk, spinning a quill in his hand like how his diary-self had used to play with his wand in the memories he shared with Percy.

“How would you murder someone that you had no access to?” Percy dares to ask. “She’s a relative of a friend, but she’s very powerful. She is staying with my friend, locked in their manor, and I do not dare trying to break in.”

Tom chuckles. “You *are* precocious. Who is it?”

“A hypothetical exercise.”

Tom gives Percy an arch look but seems content to play. “Well, poison, obviously—poisoned letters, poisoned gifts, poisoned food. You can bribe or threaten someone in the household, though that *is* risky. If you know where it is, you could surely break into the manor—”

“It’s a very old, wealthy pureblood family,” Percy breaks in. “I won’t get through their wards. They’ll be blood wards.”

“I see.” Tom leans back in his chair, tapping the quill he’d been holding thoughtfully against his lips. “You can lure her out, if you know what she wants.”

Percy thinks of Bellatrix Lestrange. He has absolutely no idea what she wants—except for magic and power and revenge. But she *will* be at the Ministry at the beginning of summer.

“I am not a very strong dueller,” Percy admits. “So if I did lure her out to a confrontation, what would you suggest?”

“You do not confront her,” Tom says, as if it is obvious. “You strike from the shadows. A single killing curse is all you need, Percy. She need not even know you are there.”

A single killing curse.

Percy glances sideways to the cage where he sometimes keeps mice to practice on. He'll need to escalate his studies to be ready by June.

"Why are you trying to kill this woman?"

"She has something I need," Percy says grimly. True, true, true. Always true.

"You think the item will pass to your friend upon her death," Tom completes, raising an eyebrow. "Clever, I suppose, though I caution you against relying on a chain of circumstance. I find it is...better, nearly always, to merely deal with the problem myself."

Actually getting the Cup from Narcissa is a problem for another time, and anyway, Percy reflects as he nods attentively as Tom begins to lecture him on the history of the Killing Curse, he would much rather take his luck with Narcissa, Draco, Andromeda or Tonks—even with Sirius Black—than with Bellatrix Lestrange.

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April 1996

Dear Percy,

Please speak to your mother. She cries nearly every day. I can forgive a lot of things from you, my son, but I find it difficult to understand why you treat your mother so cruelly. She loves you and wants the best for you.

Dad

Errol hoots mournfully when Percy lights the letter on fire. More out of tradition, than anything else; Percy keeps his flat scrupulously clean, all of his important notes in his enchanted messenger bag and on his person at all times, and everything else safely stored at Gringotts. He does not want to open himself up for attack if anyone were to break into his flat and find something incriminating.

"My father," he says in response to Tom's raised eyebrow. "I told you—Muggle loving fool that he is, he couldn't understand why I wanted to assist the Minister instead of helping him dismantle jinxes on Muggle objects. Apparently my devotion to my *career* drives my mother to tears."

"Just kill them," says Tom.

Percy just manages to control the flinch that sparks through his body. “Dumbledore is protecting them personally,” he says honestly and, he hopes, convincingly enough that Tom won’t think to pursue them if he ever has the ability to do so. “I just don’t understand. I can forgive my father being interested in Muggles…they’re a bit like animals, and some people enjoy studying animals, don’t they? But what I can’t understand is why they want to force me to follow in their footsteps.”

“They were Gryffindors also?”

Percy has noticed that Tom tends to ask Percy that question, regardless of who the subjects of his stories are. His peers do it too, at least they will in the years immediately following their graduation. But most people stop caring quite so openly about Houses by the time they are Tom’s age.

He nods. “My whole family.”

“What was it like, in Gryffindor?”

Fourteen years Percy spent in Gryffindor Tower, and the first word that comes to mind is, “Stifling.” Then he adds, feeling that description is a bit unfair, “But not *Hogwarts*. I’m not strictly sure how to explain it, but there were times at Hogwarts when I felt…limitless, I suppose. But rarely did those times coincide with the moments when I felt most aware I was a Gryffindor.”

He looks up, and to his surprise, Tom is watching him with a glint of understanding in his sharp blue eyes. “I felt the same at times about Slytherin,” the portrait says casually. “But not Hogwarts.”

“What is it like, to know that you’re *descended* from Slytherin?” Percy dares to ask. “Weasleys are Sacred Twenty Eight, but all that means is I know precisely who I’m descended from, and it’s nothing to write home about, if we’re being honest. The Prewett side is a bit better, but it’s nothing like being descended from Slytherin himself.”

Tom goes through the familiar tense-relax cycle that generally follows Percy revealing that the diary-Tom confided a secret in Percy that the diadem-Tom would certainly not think to give away. This often ends conversations, but perhaps Tom is feeling in a good mood, because he chooses to answer the question.

“When I was younger, I did find it…comforting,” Tom says thoughtfully, his painted eyebrows drawing together. “Something to explain my obvious magical talent, my knowledge that I was so much more than my inane peers. But as I grew, I realised that my talent is my own, and while I am worthy of carrying on the Slytherin heritage, I am in no means indebted to it for my power.”

Percy nods. This makes perfect sense to him, and in a way, mirrors what he occasionally feels about his own status as a time traveller. For a few years, of course, his advanced age could explain the relative ease with which Percy mastered magic, but he’s long since felt that his later achievements were all his own.

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One incident stands out toward the end of April: Molly Weasley, clearly at her wits end, forces Tonks to deliver a towering array of home-cooked meals to Percy, along with a strict admonishment that he should now feel obligated to return his mother's letters.

"Quite the traitor you've become," Percy says nastily to Tonks, who glowers at him back, her hair flashing between dark blue and black.

"As if you could lecture me on being a *traitor*," says Tonks right back, before spinning on her heel and storming away.

Percy has a sudden violent urge to bin the whole stash of food, but he is nothing if not practical, and so instead takes all of the meals back to the flat and eats his way through them for the next week and a half, trying not to feel homesick, or beholden to his mother, delivering such an unexpected gift, even if under the worst circumstances.

CONFINEMENT (4/4)

Chapter Notes

> Okay, this was a long one. Got a little out of hand, but. One of my favorite comments I have received so far politely informed me that I have written nearly 300,000 words and nothing has happened, and I'm honestly not sure if I'm making it worse or better with this update, but I'm in far too deep to rewrite it now. Just going to keep cleaning it up and posting it. If you've made it this far and you're still interested, kudos to you!

CHAPTER NINE: CONFINEMENT (4/4)

1995—1996 (Percy is 19 & 32, Severus is 34, Harry is 15, the Dark Lord is, by some accounts, 1)

May 1996

The end of the week lands on Percy's desk like a command from the Ministry himself. It is the Friday before a bank holiday, so about a quarter of the normal staff has taken the day off, though Percy, of course, loyal Ministry employee that he is, would never think of it. He's in too deep to his commitment to his career for him to miss even a single step, or at least that's the impression he hopes he gives off, and not *pathetic employee without anything at home to do*. But Fudge had snapped at him not one hour ago, bristling with stressed anger on his way out to meet with some delegation of important and wealthy wizards, and so Percy, finding it difficult to deal with the man, had picked up his things and moved to his old desk at Crouch's office. Barty is away, his office darkened, and the small bullpen of cubicles is empty. Even Liam is gone, off to happier summer times, rather than slaving away on some Ministry nonsense. Percy has not yet apologised to Liam—he *will*, he's just hoping to find a time with Liam where Barty isn't hovering over them—and so the other assistants in the department tend to avoid him as well, which Percy has to admit is his own fault. Maybe in Percy's third life he can learn to be popular.

(Anyway, back at his flat, there is a small cat waiting to be killed, and for some reason Percy finds the concept of disposing of this kitten remarkably harder to stomach. These reports, though dull, are infinitely preferable to facing Tom's long-lashed eyes tracking him as he stares down the animal, wand in his sweaty hand, unable to form the words with his dry mouth).

Despite the fact that it is the last week of May, the day outside is oddly cold and dreary, and the complex layer of warming charms that heats the Ministry falters against the oppressive gloom. Percy shivers and summons his scarf toward him with a gesture of his hand. Wandless

and wordless magic have become much easier for him, since he first started practising it nearly eight years prior.

(Has it really been eight years? The mind boggles, truly. Sometimes Percy thinks of his efforts at Hogwarts and feels them very far away. It is as if he were merely floating underwater, and discovering the diary forced him to emerge, gasping, from the middle of the Great Lake).

…the last location of Sirius Black, according to the latest Auror reports, is the middle of Hungary; what he is doing there remains unknown, but it perhaps is connected to the rumours of Dark forces gathering in the east. With Albus Dumbledore at large, we believe there is a potential these two are collaborating…

Percy shakes out the cramp in his hand and re-reads the last few sentences. Fudge is obsessed with Sirius Black. He's always been, Percy supposes, but in recent weeks Fudge has begun loudly insisting to all who will listen that Albus Dumbledore and Sirius Black are planning an attack on the Ministry.

The irony is that he is not entirely *wrong*, insofar as Black and Dumbledore are conspiring, and there will be an attack on the Ministry. Percy supposes Fudge wouldn't have made it to Minister of Magic without some instincts, but he seems to be blind to the disdainful looks he tends to elicit with his blustering. Percy keeps his head down and obediently collates weekly reports of Black's movements to give to Fudge. He also had volunteered to personally liaison with Head Auror Scrimgeour to get the latest news. Percy does not particularly like Scrimgeour, but it is critical that Scrimgeour likes *him*.

He shivers again and absently raises a stronger warming charm, which fizzles out with the slightest puff.

…It is the Auror Department's recommendation that security be increased at the Ministry, and mandatory security training be instituted for all departments…

There's the faintest sound of voices, raised. Percy bats the distraction away absently, thinking through the best way to inform Fudge that Scrimgeour is threatening a vote of no confidence if he does not treat an attack on the Ministry as imminent. The screaming grows louder, and Percy looks up irritably, only for his brain to wrench itself abruptly from its task and register what is happening.

Mist curls through the door, slowly, like the tendrils of a ghost seeking warmth. Percy scrambles to his feet, pulling out his wand, and he slowly becomes aware that more than just one person is screaming, that outside the door he hears the pounding of feet and the frantic yells of people in crisis.

"Mr. Weasley," says Crouch. Percy flinches violently and spins. Barty stands in the door of his office, dressed as his father, and looking for all the world like a disgruntled Ministry employee. "Will you come here?"

Percy swallows and looks at the door. The mist is growing slowly, but the screams are beginning to fade.

“Never mind that,” Barty says impatiently. “In, *now*.”

His feet carry him automatically into Barty’s office, though he gives the main door another uneasy look. “Yes, sir?”

Barty winks at him with his father's old, lined face. "It's time for my father to die, don't you think?"

Percy blinks and focuses more alertly on Barty. "I'm sorry?"

"My father," Barty repeats slowly. "After today you won't be seeing me at the Ministry. I wanted to let you know how much I enjoyed working with you, Percy."

Percy swallows slowly. His wand is steady in his hand, but he feels the chill of the mist dampen the back of his shirt. “Where—where are you going?”

“To claim what is rightfully mine,” hisses Barty, the gleam of his enthusiasm shining through Crouch’s watery eyes. “The Dark Lord has forgotten about me, I think. But I know how to get his attention.”

A scream, loud and distinct, rips through the air.

Barty smiles with satisfaction. “Dementors are wonderful creatures,” he says conspiratorially. “Surprisingly easy to control. Dolores is a dab hand with them, you know."

“D-Dolores?” Percy’s lips feel numb; moving them, even for the one word, is an effort.

“Dolores Umbridge, of course,” says Barty, rolling his eyes at Percy. “Come, Weasley. You’ve been trying to get her attention all year. It made me wonder—why is Percy Weasley so interested in Dolores Umbridge? I had a chat with her last time she was here. Remarkable woman. Understands how to get the job done. She was very impressed with my ingenuity in dealing with my father.”

Dolores Umbridge, working with Barty Crouch? Right. Of course. Percy shakes his head to clear it and focuses on the issue at hand. Panic begins to lick its way up his sides, but he squashes it with...well, not ease, but he hopes without much fanfare. Panicking is not productive, not when there may be a task for him to complete. To give himself time, he asks slowly, as if he did not hear Barty correctly, “There are Dementors in the Ministry? Right now?”

“Dolores told them merely to scare, not to kill,” Barty sighs, as if it bores him. “I’m hoping some of them forget. I don’t know how you do it, Weasley. Everyone in this blasted place is so *dull*. It would do them all a bit of good to get a scare, don’t you think?”

Percy has an extremely low opinion of the Dementors, not to mention Dolores Umbridge’s ability to control them. He has to tell someone—and quickly. He’s been developing with Tom a method for many people to communicate quickly, but the Order, of course, has no similar method as far as he knows. But he can at least try to tell Tonks, or maybe Moody. Surely some in the Ministry know how to do a Patronus?

But how to get away from Crouch? “I should probably be seen trying to guard Fudge,” Percy says reluctantly.

Barty smiles brightly at him. “Oh, no. Fudge left for that big meeting, you know. You’ll be helping me with my father. Winky!”

Winky appears, and floating behind her is the prone but very much alive body of Bartemius Crouch, Sr.

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Barty covers his father's body with an Invisibility Cloak and commands Percy to float it down the halls. Percy controls it with a Levitation Charm that is significantly more steady than his nerves. The mist is thicker outside Crouch's office, collecting wetly at their ankles, and the air is cold and still. The silence is eerie; he occasionally hears footsteps, but he no longer hears panicked screams or yells. With every step deeper into the Ministry, it grows quieter. Percy winces to think of the clamour that must be filling the lobby up above.

"Waste of magical blood to kill the lot of them," Barty comments to Percy. His eyes are bright and he looks around him like a man reborn. "I left a few exits open, for the smart ones, but I was hoping some would stay and fight."

"Why would they stay?" Percy points out tightly.

"Well, I did disable the Floo and the Apparation charms. Did you know there are instructions on how to do so in the Ministry pamphlet handed out to Department heads? The Ministry was just waiting for a Department Head to go rogue."

With each passing hallway, he has to wonder: where *is* everyone? If they cannot Apparate, where are they hiding?

(Later, when the dust settles and the mist clears, people will emerge from their hiding places: behind the grates of the elevators, pressed two to a toilet stall, standing very still in supply cupboards, reliving their worst nightmares so vividly some truly lost their grip on reality. The Dementors did not directly attack many—only three people lost their souls—but they floated quietly through the hallways and fed off the fear, amplified by the threat of *more.* Fear, Tom will tell Percy smugly, can be almost worse than the threat itself. But for now Percy walks through the halls and every empty corridor fills him with dread.)

"I'm not sure anyone will believe your father died today," Percy finally says when it seems apparent they are wandering without aim. "Unless he actually has his soul removed."

Barty looks back with a scowl. "Do not question me," he orders brusquely. Swiftly, like the colours of an enchanted flame, his mood changes to giddiness, and his voice takes on a playful lilt. "I know a secret."

"What's the secret?" Percy says tiredly. The strain of maintaining the charm is beginning to get to him. Winky walks silently beside; why can't she do the manual labour? Bloody elf.

"The Dark Lord is coming to the Ministry tonight," Barty reveals. His laugh echoes down the corridor. Percy freezes in place, and Crouch's body stutters and nearly crashes to the floor. Winky scowls at Percy and snaps her fingers, halting Crouch's fall.

"But it's too soon," Percy says, stupidly.

"Too soon?"

Percy inhales and continues to walk. Relieved of his magical burden, he grips his wand tightly, trying desperately to think of a plan. "Well, don't you want Fudge to be voted out of power first?"

Internally, he cringes at the weak excuse. Internally, he also begins to panic. Externally, he hopes he remains calm.

"No," Barty says dismissively. "Easier with Fudge. He'll be an easy *Imperio*, not like Scrimgeour. The man's been nosing around here *far* too often for my tastes. I've already decided I'm going to ask the Dark Lord permission to kill him when I get the chance."

"But why—why is the Dark Lord coming here? Did you break through the wards on the Department of Ministries?"

Barty shrugs insouciantly. "There aren't any wards on the Department of Ministries. Least, that clerk I interrogated seemed to think so."

Landon? Percy licks his lips and then ventures, "So the Dark Lord has decided to come tonight?"

"He wanted to wait until the Potter boy finished his exams," Barty snorts incredulously. "Can you believe it? He said he wanted to give Potter the chance to earn his OWLs before he dies. *I* think we ought to strike when the cauldron is boiling. *He* wants to reveal himself to the world; why not now?"

Percy has absolutely no trouble imagining Tom scheduling a murder for right after his victim's exams. He would bet Galleons that Tom would also find a way to gain access to the results. The sudden familiarity, instead of being comforting, twists his stomach further. Percy has spent months telling himself that the Dark Lord is mad and unpredictable, not clever and cunning like Tom. It is unpleasant to remember that is not quite the case.

"But exams aren't for a fortnight," protests Percy, who after taking them for fourteen years has the exam schedule firmly in his head.

Barty shrugs again. "I don't see it matters much whether Potter takes his exams. Likely he won't survive the night."

"So you what—changed his mind?"

Barty turns on Percy in a fury, and in Percy's surprise he barely manages to keep from hexing Barty instinctively. "I will not be ignored," Barty hisses, his father's face twisted with rage. *"I* helped to bring him back. *I* found the recipe for the potion. *I* infiltrated Hogwarts and ensured Harry Potter would arrive at the right place, defenceless. *I* Imperioused Krum and that Delacour girl, I stole the Gillyweed from Snape, I killed Amos Diggory, I gave the Dark Lord everything on the platter, and I will give him Harry Potter again!"

For a wild second, all Percy can think is that Barty Crouch is going to die very soon. The Dark Lord does not look kindly on arrogance. Even Percy knows that. Barty should begin watching his steps.

"So you don't know that he's coming today," Percy presses, needing the explicit confirmation.

Barty only throws a wild smile over his shoulder and continues on. Percy follows, focusing only on the charm. He isn't surprised when Barty stops at the large atrium that introduces the Department of Mysteries. There is no Order guard in sight, of course; it is still the day, and the Department is likely empty only because Barty's trick with the Dementors drew away the crowd.

Percy stays quiet as Barty commands Winky to conceal his father's body under the large receptionist's desk, the only piece of furniture in the black room. Percy has never liked the décor of the Department of Mysteries, though Landon claims to find its stark lines calming. Can he contact Landon? Will Landon be here? Would that help him at all?

Percy puzzles over it as Barty arranges his father's body almost tenderly so that all of his limbs are hidden underneath the large, wooden desk. "I want him to be caught in the crossfire, but only at the proper moment," Barty says in way of explanation as he looks around the room in satisfaction. "Winky, do you have the robes? Good. Wake him up once the fighting starts, and make sure he looks like a Death Eater. Make sure the mask sticks; don't want him ripping it off once he realises what's on."

"Don't you want to take care of him yourself?" Percy cannot help but ask. "It feels riskier to do it this way."

Barty shrugs. "I'll kill him later, then. Want to give him the shock of his life to wake up in his beloved *Ministry*. I'm hoping one of the Order accidentally kills him when they see him wearing the Death Eater robes."

"You don't want to be the one to, er...cast the spell?" Not that Percy *wants* Crouch to die, but he can't help his curiosity.

"I think it's more of an insult to his memory if I don't," says Barty, sticking out his tongue at his father before Winky covers the body with the Invisibility Cloak. "Now come. We'll hide ourselves in the Hall. I brought robes for you."

"I can't wear them," Percy demurs instantly. Barty gives him a questioning look and Percy feels the tips of his ears flush as he struggles for an explanation. "I can't wear them, Barty. If my family sees me, they'll never trust me again."

“Yes, where is your family anyway?” The other man says. “They should be here by now.”

Before Percy can reply, a smooth voice cuts in. “Barty Crouch Jr., I presume?”

He spins around to see two Death Eaters, fully robed and masked, stride into the room. The one in front is recognizably Lucius; his flowing blonde locks gleam on either side of the bone-white mask, and his tone is as silky as ever. Wildly, crazily, Percy’s only coherent thought amidst his rising panic is that there is not much point to the mask if it is readily apparent which pureblood prince is behind it.

“Surprise,” says Barty, his smile now fixed to his face. “Malfoy. What are you doing here?”

Lucius makes a production of removing his mask, as if he does not fear recognition. The other Death Eater—Percy recognises him as Rookwood—does the same, glancing at Lucius for confirmation. “The Dark Lord sent me, of course. He suspected something when he heard reports of Dementors in the Ministry. He told me all about your little exploits in the Ministry.” Lucius glances around him, as if he is bored. “So you escape from the dead, Barty, help to resurrect the Dark Lord, spend the year impersonating your father, and *this* is your plan?”

Barty flushes at the open skepticism in Lucius’ tone and takes a step toward Lucius. Rookwood reaches for his wand. “I’ll bring him Potter—again.”

“You fool, he can get Potter whenever he likes,” Lucius hisses back. “He can send him dreams. Potter will come running whenever the Dark Lord sees fit.”

The Dark Lord can *send* Harry dreams? This information snaps Percy right out of his panic. To send someone dreams suggests a mental connection of a serious nature. Why is the Dark Lord so *connected* to Harry?

Barty ignores this revelation and snaps back, tone combative, “I’ll bring him the Order too. Weasley’s going to notify them.”

Lucius gives Percy an evaluative look. Percy fights the urge to straighten his robes. “Weasley. I expected better of you than to go along with this madman. If you had indicated a desire to be involved in—shall we say, certain plans—I would have been happy to assist you...personally.”

“I did not know this was the plan,” says Percy instantly. If he had to choose whether to back Lucius or Barty in a fight, he knows who he would align himself with, and it isn’t Barty. “Lord Malfoy, if my family comes and sees me, some of my own plans will be for naught.”

“Such a fine line you seek to maintain,” drawls Lucius. “It must truly be exhausting for you. Barty, you do realise the defences you triggered will prevent all from entering or exiting, save those who have the ward-key?”

“So? Easier to pick them off, I say,” claims Barty with false bravado.

“You absolute *imbecile*. Potter won’t be able to get in either.” Lucius waits just long enough for panic to cross Barty’s face before he says with a snap to his voice, “This little escapade has gone on long enough, Barty. Call off the beasts; you’ll be making your excuses to the Dark Lord personally. I’m sure he’ll be interested to know why, precisely, you felt the need to undermine his plans.”

Percy feels a great wave of relief. Of course Lucius wouldn’t allow an act like this to occur, not in broad daylight, and not out of his control. He’ll take care of Barty, and Percy—well, Percy will be stuck in a new mire of lies and deception, but he’d take that over the Dark Lord any day.

But Barty sticks out his chest obstinately and says, “Then I’ll bring him the prophecy. That’s what you’re all here about, right? No need to look surprised, Lucius; I figured it out on my own.”

Percy glances at Lucius, but his face remains smoothed into a mask of bored disdain. It is Rookwood who speaks, his voice deep and gruff. “Idiot,” he spits out, “You cannot fetch a prophecy unless you are the recipient.”

“If the Ministry is empty right now, why—” Percy starts, his mouth moving automatically, before he can stop himself.

Lucius gives him an amused look. “Why does the Dark Lord not fetch the prophecy himself? You will have to learn soon, Weasley, not to question the Dark Lord’s motives, or you will end up like your…*friend* there.”

Percy flushes and ducks his head to the ground, cursing his inability to keep his mouth shut.

Rookwood answers his question anyway, not seeming to question his presence in this large, draughty room. “Better not to risk it,” he says in his curt, harsh voice. “Let the boy try. If he dies…”

“One of our problems solved,” says Lucius coolly. “But our Lord is waiting for the opportune time, Barty. It is unfortunate that you will be the scapegoat for this mishap, but I’m sure you will be willing to return to Azkaban, all in service of our Lord, of course.”

“No,” gasps Barty, his bravado dropping away as he realises what Lucius intends. “You can’t send me back there, Lucius. I’d rather die.”

Lucius exchanges a look with Rookwood. “Well, we can arrange that, can’t we?”

Just when it all seems like it will resolve itself, Lucius tucking the problem away neatly like he must do in all things, everything changes. Something travels through Lucius’ body; he straightens as if stung with a hex, his body going rigid, and his tense muscles visible through the dark robes. In an unconscious movement, he covers his left forearm with his right hand, gripping himself so tightly his knuckles stand out, white and swollen. His eyes flutter shut, and his mouth moves, just slightly, as if speaking to himself.

Rookwood does not seem fazed, though he twirls his wand in an obvious threat to Barty, who watches the proceedings warily. “What—what’s he doing?”

“Receiving instructions from our Lord,” says Rookwood. “I take it He has never deigned to speak to you like that.”

Barty opens his mouth to argue back, but Lucius relaxes, the tension leaving his limbs as whatever spell gripped his body ebbs out of him.

“Well, Barty, it looks like you are in luck,” Lucius spits out, looking less than pleased at the revelation. “The Dark Lord has decided to take advantage of the diversion you created. Harry Potter should be on his way shortly. Rookwood, go lift the wards on the Muggle entry. Barty, come. The Dark Lord has instructed me to call him *only* when Potter has retrieved the prophecy, do you understand? And then only if we believe it—prudent. If you *dare* call him at any other time than on my command, I will not hesitate to cut you where you stand, is that understood?”

Barty looks at Lucius resentfully but ducks his head when Lucius rests his hand threateningly on the head of his cane.

“And you,” Lucius says quietly, his voice no longer harsh and commanding but as soft and smooth as dark velvet. He takes slow, careful steps until he is so close to Percy that Percy can smell the mint on his breath. “Weasley. If you even *think* about alerting your family to what is going on, I will kill them all personally, in turn, starting with your dear mother. Is *that* understood?”

Percy nods frantically, his heart beating so aggressively against his chest that he feels as though he may faint.

Lucius smiles, his nose almost touching Percy’s. “Careful, little cat,” he whispers. “The time to run has long passed.”

Percy looks into Lucius’ icy blue eyes and, for once in his life, his mind is completely blank with fear. He does not have a single plan, nor an idea of what to do. All he can think about is the way his heart is beating heavily and irregularly against his chest.

“Barty, I believe you said you had robes for him?”

Barty starts and takes out a small package from his own robes. He tosses it to Percy, who resizes them, feeling very much like he is in a dream.

Under their expectant gazes, Percy swallows against something like sickness and then takes off his own Ministry robes, replacing them with the heavy woollen cloth of the Death Eater robes. They are lightly warded with protection charms, he notices, something the Order would well do to adopt. The last thing to resize is the mask. It is cold in his hand, uncomfortably like bone.

“If the mask slips, you’re on your own,” Lucius says coolly. “Welcome to the ranks, Weasley.”

Percy feels very much like hyperventilating, but he manages enough calm to fix the mask onto his face with a strong sticking charm. Striving for calm, he practices the self-Transfiguration he's nearly perfected, changing his tell-tale red hair to a dark brown, and lightening his eyes to blue. He'd go for a more extensive disguise, but he doesn't think he can keep it up under duress.

Thus attired, he swallows and follows Lucius.

***

The Hall of Prophecy is dark and cold and incredibly eerie. Percy walks silently down the hallway, following the black robes of the Death Eaters, and looks at the rows of prophecies with awe. Each one so carefully inscribed with a name and date, each one in its proper place. He has never put much stock in Divination, but seeing the multitude of predictions—the futures fanning out in front of him, the multiple branches of fate and destiny, lives resonating against mirror lives—he cannot help but believe, suddenly, in their existence. Surely so many cannot be wrong. If they were so easily disproved, why would the Ministry bother to store them?

He hears steps and flinches but does not move from his spot in the back of the formation, opposite Barty, but behind Lucius. But the noise is only Rookwood, returning from his task to lift the wards, presumably so that Harry can enter. Now that the initial panic has worn off, he feels the familiar snap of his brain as it coils into position. It is like a game, or a puzzle: the Death Eaters, the Ministry, the Order, Harry Potter, and the Dark Lord, all centred around one small prophecy. This night may be happening a few weeks early, and undoubtedly differently, but from what both Lucius and Barty had said, it sounded like the Dark Lord was planning some variant of this night already. Percy is the main unknown element here, and the days where he was too afraid to change the timeline are long past.

Percy knows the prophecy by heart, but perhaps Dumbledore does not, and neither does the Dark Lord. Harry presumably must need the prophecy, but perhaps Percy can find a way to inform the Order of its wording when necessary. If he tells Snape, Snape could tell Dumbledore, and that would not be too much of a delay, would it?

So perhaps Percy should destroy the prophecy, so that the Dark Lord never learns it in its entirety. But how can he destroy it if he cannot touch it?

Sirius Black dies tonight, and it is somehow Harry's fault, or at least Harry thinks it is his fault, years after the event. Percy can *probably* prevent that. If he's remembering Sirius' funeral correctly—belatedly performed by Harry after the swaths of funerals from the Battle of Hogwarts finally concluded—then Bellatrix Lestrange had been the one to throw the final curse.

And Percy needs to remove Bellatrix Lestrange anyway.

It's always dangerous to rely on another, he imagines Tom saying.

And the Order is not here. Not to mention, the rest of the Ministry *is* here, those who are not yet soulless. Percy shivers at the thought. This had all happened rather late in the evening last time; Percy remembers being summoned by Fudge after he'd finished supper and showering, and having to rush to the Ministry with his hair still wet.

Percy is here, too. He does not need to be an observer forever. Percy had saved Cedric's life. Percy had found Tom's orphanage, and perhaps the next Horcrux too. Percy can act, if he can just master the fear threatening to forestall him.

He tries to plot quietly while they stand there for what feels like an interminable length of time, perfectly still, waiting for the Boy Who Lived. Percy is just feeling he can stand in one place no longer, even with the Cushioning Charms he casts underneath his feet, when he hears a door open, many metres away.

"It's through here," Harry whispers, and Percy flinches again.

***

Six teenagers enter the room. Harry first, followed by Ron and Hermione, and then just behind, Ginny, Neville, and Luna. They press together as they move into the room, and their breath mists slightly in the frigid air. They are dressed in their school robes and seem to be taking no precautions other than gripping their wands tightly. Percy wants to scream. Where is Cedric, at the very least?

"You said it was row ninety-seven," whispers Hermione, and Harry nods in affirmation. It must have been easy for the Dark Lord to plant a vision in Harry's head, and all too easy for Harry to believe the best solution would be for him to charge off with five other teenagers to rescue the prophecy himself.

Luna passes so close to where the Death Eaters are hiding under Disillusionment Charms between rows ninety-four and ninety-six that he feels the soft warmth of her breath on his frozen skin. She frowns, staring at the dark gap between the shelves, and he feels the weight of her gaze on him.

Percy shifts—and stiffens, as Lucius, presumably, hits him silently with a powerful Silencing charm.

"There's something here, Harry," Luna calls out in a high, thin voice. Percy has a very vague memory of her from all of the times he'd walked Ginny to the Lovegood house during long summers, but he cannot remember anything about her other than her memorable name.

"The vision specified row ninety-seven, Luna," snaps Hermione.

Finite Incantatem, Percy thinks in his head for the tenth time, but the spell is no more successful this time than it is on any of the other ten attempts. Percy vows to himself that if he gets out of this mess, he will finish the book that Lucius sent him cover to cover. Percy prides himself on his magic, but the ease with which Lucius rendered him helpless—despite the shield charm that Percy keeps up nearly constantly—makes him feel weak.

Luna finally blinks her large, round eyes and then turns around, trailing one hand along the shelves as she catches up to the rest. They are gathered to the right of Percy. Lucius had predicted where they would be, of course, and presumably positioned himself just so that he would have a direct line of sight.

"He should be here," Harry insists, looking around him into the endless rows of prophecies. Percy briefly loses sight of him as Harry peers down another shelf. "Or maybe…"

"Harry," Hermione says hesitantly. "I don't think Sirius is here."

The silence echoes loudly through the empty room. So this is how the Dark Lord lured Harry out of hiding. Percy wonders if Sirius has been captured, if he's already been soul-sucked by one of the Dementors outside. Percy has already changed the timeline so indelibly even by being here that he is determined to rescue Sirius too.

(Or maybe, he realises, as the others mutter in low tones, him being here will change nothing at all).

"Harry," Ron calls. "Have you seen this?"

Harry hurries back into view. "What?"

"It's—it's got your name on it."

Percy longs desperately to glimpse what they are seeing, but he cannot see around their huddle of bodies.

"My name?"

"S.P.T to A.P.W.B.D," reads out Hermione. "Dark Lord and—question mark?—Harry Potter."

"What is it?" Ron asks. "What's your name doing down here? I'm not here. None of the rest of us are here."

You're not important enough to have a prophecy written about you, Percy thinks in irritation —although he does wonder, suddenly, whether one of these glowing blue spheres has his name on it. If it does, is he better off knowing, or not knowing?

"There is a prophecy about me?" Harry asks in bewilderment.

"There is," Lucius says, stepping out of the darkness. Percy dithers about whether to follow him but then steps into line obediently when Barty cuts his head sharply. All six teenagers gasp in unison and huddle together tightly, their wands out. Lucius cuts an imposing figure in

the pale blue light, and though he doesn't do anything as stupid as look toward Percy, Percy feels as though some of the theatrics are for his benefit. "You're late, Potter."

"Where's Sirius?" Harry demands.

Barty laughs, wild and shrill and high. With a start, Percy realises where he has heard that laugh before: in Roberts' memory, from the man watching from the woods. Of course. Barty was the one that cast *Morsmordre* and so presumably was the one who tortured Roberts. Stupid, stupid, stupid. If only Percy had investigated that more thoroughly, perhaps more of this would have been prevented. "Slow, this one."

"What did you do to Sirius?"

"Why so delayed, Potter?" Lucius asks coolly, taking a step toward Harry. "Your precious little godfather had to wait until you finished your homework?"

Harry falters. Hermione puts her hand on his arm, and he shakes her off angrily. "Tell me where Sirius is."

"Tell me why it took you so long to get here," Lucius snaps back. "We've been waiting for you, Potter."

"You're right," Harry says coldly. "My homework took too long."

Lucius smirks and allows his gaze to drag lazily up Harry's body. "Pity. Your charming godfather will at least be able to die knowing his godson is, shall we say—a *scholar*."

Harry growls and lunges for Lucius, but Lucius stills him with some sort of nonverbal Stunner that merely forces Harry to step back abruptly as if struck.

"Come, Harry," Lucius continues silkily. "Manners, or did Sirius teach you nothing? I knew his mother, you know. Delightful woman. She would have raised you right. It's truly regrettable that you went to those filthy Muggles."

"Is Sirius alive?" Harry spits at Lucius. The others remain motionless. *Run*, Percy begs them in his mind. *Grab Harry and run.* At the least they could have raised shield spells, the idiots. What are they waiting for, a gilded invitation?

"Why don't you give me the prophecy, and I'll give you your precious godfather? We are men of honour here, Harry; I give you my word that you will all be allowed to leave freely."

"You couldn't take the prophecy yourself?" Harry asks, his eyes narrowed.

Yes, Percy cheers him on in his head. For the first—and hopefully not last—time that Percy has observed, Harry seems to be capable of using deductive reasoning to arrive at a correct conclusion.

Lucius extends a gloved hand. "Just hand it over, Harry, and this whole nightmare will be over."

“Show me Sirius first.”

Lucius spreads his hands and gestures toward the back of the Hall of Prophecy. “Why don’t we go together and see?”

“Why don’t you bring him here while we wait?”

There’s a bit of a scuffle after this cheeky rejoinder leaves Harry’s mouth; Percy flinches, expecting the worst; Lucius reaches for Harry and Harry jerks back, bumping into Ron at his left shoulder. An involuntary curse; a smash as the prophecy drops; and then everyone in the Hall of Prophecy grows silent as a ghostly form twists out of the shattered glass.

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches…

The voice is familiar, oddly so, but Percy does not have time to dwell on it as panic licks up the sides of his stomach. Surely this is not how the prophecy should be revealed, to everyone all at the same time, by accident. Percy knows the prophecy; he can tell Harry if needed, but *surely* Lucius and Rookwood and Neville and the rest don’t need to hear it, not now, not like this.

Like in the maze, his hand moves without thinking, and the Banishment charm twists silently out of his wand before he can think too deeply on the consequences.

A flinch snaps through the group, Death Eaters and Hogwarts students alike, as another prophecy smashes on the ground, a second ghostly voice joining the first. Percy doesn’t dare move again, but one of the teenagers—Ginny, it seems—seems to understand, and another prophecy smashes on the ground, and another.

“*Run!”* shouts Harry, finally, and he flings his wand behind him, sending a row of prophecies careening to the ground. Lucius swears loudly as one smashes right near his foot, causing him to jump and stumble back into Barty. The teenagers’ footsteps echo loudly in the hall as they take off the way they came, pursued in short order by Lucius and Rookwood. Percy makes to follow, but Barty clutches his shoulder so painfully that it jerks Percy back despite himself.

“The prophecy,” Barty whispers, his throat hoarse and panicked. “He’ll kill us if we lose the prophecy.”

Percy rather objects to the word *we*, but he nods obediently and follows Barty to where the end of Harry’s prophecy is wheezing out its last few breaths.

…the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies…

And then there is silence, broken by the occasional sound of one of the other smashed prophecies incanting their last lines.

Barty drops to the floor and scrabbles through the shards, seemingly not noticing how the glass pricks his skin and coaxes blood from his bony hands. “He’ll kill me,” he mutters to

himself, his fingers closing around a large jagged shard of glass and squeezing it with such force that a large droplet of blood falls sluggishly to the ground. “He’ll kill me.”

“We’ve got to go,” says Percy impatiently, jerking his head toward where Harry ran off. “Potter’s still there.”

Percy leaves Barty behind, though he hears the other man following him after a few seconds of delay. Luckily it is not difficult to follow the path of destruction to where Harry and his friends fled. Percy spares a single thought to all of those prophecies, now forever lost, but when he steps out of the Hall of Prophecy back into the large central atrium of the Department of Ministries, he sees they have far greater problems than a few smashed orbs.

Tonks and Moody and Scrimegour are there, along with a few Aurors Percy does not know, facing off against Lucius and Rookwood. Harry and the others are slightly to the side, completing the slightly lopsided triangle, all groups with their wands outstretched and glowing.

“...come quietly, Lucius,” Moody is saying, his blue eye focused intently on Lucius. “That little mask isn’t fooling anyone.”

“Why, Alastor, I’ve no idea what you mean,” says Lucius innocently. “To make such baseless and vulgar accusations about my identity—I’m shocked.”

“You’re trapped in the Ministry,” Scrimgeour says, shaking his head. “And there’s only two of you against all of us.”

“Four, I believe,” Lucius corrects smoothly. He turns to where Percy is lingering near the doorway, Barty right behind. At Lucius’ look, Percy has no choice but to walk to where the other Death Eaters are, cloaked in their heavy black robes, their white masks gleaming in the odd flickering lights of the Ministry. “We could duel, but I rather think that would be a tiresome exercise for us all, don’t you agree?”

Percy isn’t sure who throws the first curse; Tonks, maybe, her hair flashing orange, or Rookwood with his gruff, deep voice, or Harry, his face hard and furious. It does not particularly matter, for once one spell has been cast, the rest are unleashed, like a horde of hippogriffs no longer held back by their trainer.

Percy focuses at first on shielding, hesitant to throw any curses himself, but he finds that neither the Aurors nor the students have any compunction about targeting him, and so he must fight back despite himself. He chooses Stunners and begins targeting Luna and Neville, hoping to defeat them and remove their bodies to the sides of the room, where they hopefully would remain out of harm.

But this incites Tonks to turn on him, and Percy has the singularly uncomfortable experience of facing off with one of his best friends, her eyes narrowed and the spells shooting from her wand considerably nastier than a simple Stunner. It takes all of his skill to parry her attacks, and even the consolation that if he is duelling her, nobody else will be targeting her—hopefully keeping her safe—is a weak prize in comparison.

Where is everyone else? Snape, Kingsley, his father? Can the Order truly not bypass the security charms of the Ministry?

“Where’s Sirius?” Harry demands again, wielding his wand against Lucius with surprising skill. Percy resolves to send a note to Cedric to thank him, if they all make it out of this mess alive.

Percy tunes out their conversation as he begins to layer spell after spell around the teenagers in between shielding from Tonks. He does not think Lucius or Barty will recognize what he is doing; the bolts of light shooting from his wand are dark green since he is actually employing Dark Magic. It is a tricky balancing act. Layered wards require knowledge of each composite spell, an understanding of the magical theory of spell-spell interaction, the ability to hold each spell in one's mind, so that the magic hovers in front but is not yet deployed, and the power to finally snap the finished ward into place. He does not want to raise anything that will catch Lucius’ attention, but given that the other man is beginning to turn slightly red as he sends curse after curse toward Harry, Percy bets that he will not notice the subtle gathering of magic that is beginning to stir the hems of their robes.

Go, Percy commands, and the green boundaries of the spell are briefly visible around their feet before they snap to the bodies of each teenager. Percy sags in relief and sends a Dark variant of the stunner to Luna. It dissolves into her shield.

Then—“Luciusssss,” hisses a sibilant voice, and all activity ceases.

The Dark Lord glides into the room, his pale, serpentine face shining eerily in the blue light of the dim atrium. Behind him are several more Death Eaters—Percy, from his avid study of the Dark Lord’s followers, thinks he recognizes Bellatrix Lestrange, Rosier, and Yaxley, but three of them are too nondescript for him to identify. The Dark Lord’s magic precedes him; it gathers itself and spreads stickily over the room, encasing each occupant with an oily film of Dark power.

Percy gulps and stays very still. He won’t risk any more shielding spells. The Dark Lord would *definitely* notice that.

“Am I to understand that Harry here is not being...amenable?” The Dark Lord continues in a friendly, interested tone that is somehow the most frightening thing that Percy has ever heard.

Harry firms his grip on his wand and glares at the Dark Lord, his mossy eyes dark with determination. Behind him, Ginny and Ron have gone matching tones of pale, and Luna’s eyes are wider, if possible. Neville has eyes only for Lestrange.

“Where is Sirius?” Harry demands.

Instead of answering, the Dark Lord looks to Lucius, and there is a moment of frozen silence while he extracts some information directly out of Lucius’ mind. Then—and it takes everything in Percy not to collapse—the Dark Lord glances, just for a second, at where Percy is standing.

“Your precious godfather is dead,” the Dark Lord croons. His high, sibilant voice does not remind Percy in any way of Tom, but something about the way he drawls his words, the casual air of malice that underpins each sentence, *is* familiar. “But do not worry, Harry; before the night is up you will join him.”

Sirius—dead, already?

Harry goes as pale as Ron. “The prophecy broke.”

The Dark Lord’s nostrils, or what passes for them, flare slightly. Percy watches with horrified fascination. Surely *this* had been a mistake? He thinks of his portrait of Tom, haughty and proud even in a room of paint, and cannot believe for a second that Tom would have willingly bound himself to this horrifying form.

“I care not for the prophecy,” the Dark Lord says. “Nor for your...friends. No, Harry Potter. I came here tonight for you.”

“I heard it,” bluffs Harry. “I know what it says.”

The Dark Lord glides closer to the children. “We need not all hear it, Harry, and we have more important things to discuss. You shall whisper it to me as you lay dying. Now, I will give you a choice. I require the lives of one of your friends, and I shall let you choose who it may be.”

“Take me instead, you coward,” Harry snaps back defiantly. “Leave them alone.”

Percy takes back every thought he had about the absurdity that Harry Potter, boy wizard, should be entrusted with such a fate as his. He is so small and scrawny, but he stares up at the monstrous Dark Lord without a hint of fear.

The Dark Lord’s laugh is shrill and grating. “Oh, sweet Harry, brave Harry. Or shall I turn the choice over to your friends? Which of you will die in service? I can assure you that your death will have meaning. If you choose one, Harry, only one will die—or I can kill them all, if you’d prefer.”

Percy feels a tremendous well of sympathy for Harry, for his family—and then he blinks, because even the fear of standing next to the Dark Lord is not enough to turn his mind from the omnipresent pressure of his task. He’s planning to make a Horcrux. With what? Does he have the vessel here? Why? Why risk another, to split his soul again? Eight splits? Surely not; even the Dark Lord would know that would make him unstable.

Don’t be idiotic, Percy, Tom’s voice floats through Percy’s brain. ***Be logical.***

Would Tom make another Horcrux if there were already six splits? There is a logical explanation for this. Either he knows one of his Horcruxes has been destroyed—but how could he know? At best Lucius could only guess at the diary’s destruction, and anyway, if he knew one of them was destroyed, would he not check on the rest?—or he never finished making all six when he was alive last.

Do they *know* he made six before he returned? Perhaps he made only four—diary, diadem, cup, and whatever is in those high, cruel caves. Perhaps he is going to make two more, and they can stop him before he does.

"An innocent," Barty cackles, and something about that phrase triggers a memory that is just out of reach…

(But, a voice in his head whispers, how can they ever be *sure* they destroyed them all?)

Harry's voice is high but steady. "What do you want with them?"

"I have to finish something, Harry. Something you prevented me from doing all those years ago. Do not worry; I will not fail again. But you're right, of course. Better to use you. More—poetic, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't do that, Tom," says Albus Dumbledore, and Percy nearly collapses to the floor in relief.

At the sight of Dumbledore, the Dark Lord's face twists in rage. There is a second of still calm, and then the Dark Lord attacks, and Percy is drowning in magic.

There's a serpent of fire twisting out of the Dark Lord's wand—

—but Dumbledore swallows it in a massive wave of water, the resulting steam hanging in the air. A slash of the Dark Lord's wand turns it into glass, and Dumbledore transfigures the glass into a transparent phoenix, which caws loudly before diving at the Dark Lord.

It's Transfiguration at its finest, and it is *beautiful*.

The Dark Lord explodes the wall behind Dumbledore, and the two wizards move into the adjourning rubble, eyes only on each other, taunting each other with feats of magic. For a second Percy hopes he'll be able to escape, but then the rest of the Order rushes in, and the room is once again full of spells.

Protect the others, Percy thinks to himself, and he turns back to the small Chosen One, squaring off against Lucius Malfoy.

He can get them out of here—somehow. Percy's mind roves over the possibilities, even as he deflects spells from the Order. Apparition is risky; the Floos are closed; he does not want to be seen. Think, think.

He thinks suddenly, improbably, of brick dust caked into his shoes.

Portkeys, of course. Portkeys are incredibly difficult to enchant against, which makes them so expensive to obtain. But after the Quidditch World Cup Percy had looked into the theory, and recently with Tom he'd been debating the idea of creating small Portkeys that would be localised to a specific destination. He needs objects, small objects, inconspicuous ones.

Quills. He has quills in his bag, which is slung against his chest even now. Percy never goes anywhere without his bag, not since the Chamber of Secrets. He plunges his hand into his bag

and comes up with several quills. All expensive—but the loss will be worth it.

Sending stunners aimlessly toward the Order, he moves toward the only cover in the room, the wooden desk where Crouch is stashed. But of course, Winky has somehow shaken off his Confundus and woken Crouch on her master's command, and Crouch is stumbling out on his knees, clad in dark Death Eater robes but no mask, looking confused. "Barty?"

Percy casts a very fast Banishing charm, and Crouch flies to the opposite end of the room, where he's struck by several hexes thrown by—Neville, if Percy's not mistaken.

Protego maxima, he thinks again, jabbing his wand in the general direction of the teenagers. He doesn't have time to set up another layered ward of protection; he'll have to hope his first one holds.

A spell hits him, and though his shield absorbs most of the impact, he allows himself to fall as if struck. From his position on the ground, he sees the silvery outline of the Invisibility Cloak left by Crouch, and with a quick glance around him to ensure nobody is watching, Percy swings it over himself. The Cloak is not as high quality as Harry's; Percy stretches out a hand to test the charm and can see a faint shimmer, more like a weak Disillusionment charm than anything else.

He crouches underneath the desk, careful to keep himself covered with the cloak. The spell to create Portkeys is difficult but not impossible. But where to send them? Somewhere it can't be traced back to Percy...somewhere safe…somewhere without heavy warding...

His mind lurches around the options and arrives fixedly at the Burrow. His mother is hopefully there, though she of course may be here, or in London, but it is considerably safer than the Ministry. He fills his mind with remembrances of the Burrow, the creaking staircases, the wide and grassy hills, the small river where Ginny used to play endless games with Ron. *Destination, determination, deliberation*. *"Portus,"* he breathes out loud, letting the soft green spell wash over the first quill.

It thrums with energy in his palm and then stills. He sets it on the floor and reaches for the next one. He needs six in total, six to go to the Burrow, six perfect Portkeys. The next spell is harder than the first, and the third and fourth harder still. He breathes evenly, summoning his strength before attempting the next.

"NYMPHADORA!" Lupin's agonised cry rips through the air, and Percy inhales sharply, gripping the fifth quill so hard that it snaps in his palm. But he can't look up. He can't risk being seen or caught by an errant spell.

It is much harder to fix the thought of the Burrow in his head, but he pushes aside all of his concern and focuses on the way the sun dances over the great English oak, the sound of the pigs and the chickens competing for food. The fifth quill glows and subsides, and then it's only the sixth one left.

"*Remus, duck!"*

Percy jabs his wand blindly and mutters another *Protego maxima*, hoping it'll land on friend and not foe. For the sixth quill he bites off the spell and mutters a relieved swear when it too glows.

He peers over the desk. Tonks' body is on the floor, prone and bleeding. Lupin and Black are battling with a cackling Bellatrix Lestrange. The sight of Tonks' body is so much more difficult to ignore; he hesitates, the quills falling from his limp hands, as Lupin and Black struggle to hold off Bellatrix.

"Dirty half-blood girl," Bellatrix says with a crazed laugh. "Are you in love with her, werewolf? Or maybe you, cousin. I always knew the Black name would come to ruin."

Tonks, bleeding.

It's just like blowing out a candle. Tom is suddenly there, his voice silky and sombre in Percy's head. ***You're so tired of waiting and watching, Percy. Always in the shadows, always hiding under invisibility. It's time for you to act, and this is such an easy one, isn't it?***

You're not real. Percy tells it firmly.

"You *bitch!"* howls Sirius, leaping toward Bellatrix. Lupin cries out as Bellatrix whirls on her cousin, a dark black bolt of lightning curving from her wand. Sirius falls to the floor with a sickening thud.

I may be in your head, whispers Tom, soft and smoky and unutterably familiar, ***but are you sure that means I am not real?***

What would you have me do?

Bellatrix's laugh is loud and jarring, so like Barty's at his most crazed, grating against Percy's ears. She turns to Lupin, whose face is contorted into a snarl. The wolf seems to shine from his amber eyes. Percy realises absently his heart is beating very quickly, but his palms are not sweaty, and his head feels curiously clear.

Act, Percy, before it is too late.

"*Avada Kedavra,"* he whispers in a voice that he barely recognizes, and he watches as Bellatrix Lestrange drops to the floor, dead.

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His instincts kick in a second later and he ducks back below the desk, though he didn't take off the Cloak the entire time. His heart is beating so quickly that his pulse throbs through his entire body, but he feels so exultantly alive that he wants to chuckle out loud.

He did it. He *did it*. He killed Bellatrix Lestrange, and he's one step closer to the Horcrux.

He did it, and damn the consequences. He's grinning so widely that it nearly hurts the sides of his mouth. And he thought to kill would be painful; that he may even throw up. But to kill in *war* is not shameful, not *wrong*—it's right, and he did it, and he doesn't feel an ounce of regret. He feels invincible.

Well done, Percy.

But when he crawls out he sees that Lupin, joined by Moody, is under a deluge of spells, holding off two of the Death Eaters. Percy swears and sends some shielding charms in their direction, and then he turns to the teenagers and grips his handful of quills, preparing to send them toward the group.

And then he feels a wand to his head at the same second that the Cloak is ignominiously pulled off of him.

"What are you doing, Percy?" Barty asks him softly, dangerously. He's kneeling behind Percy, his body half-hidden by the desk, and he puts his mouth very close to Percy's ear. Percy tenses, but he's still feeling full of that bubble of elation, and so he doesn't flinch away.

"They don't deserve to die."

"That's not really your call, is it? Why don't I call the Dark Lord over here—ask him if he still needs one of the kids."

"Barty, *leave me be."*

"Are you lying to me, Percy?" Barty croons in his ear, twisting his wand strongly into Percy's head. "Surely you're not lying to me. Surely not, after all that we shared together."

"If you think I would lie to you in the presence of the Dark Lord, you're a fool," whispers Percy, his eyes flitting to where the Dark Lord is still tangled with Dumbledore.

"If you think I've believed everything you said, then you're the fool," Barty hisses back. "I just kept you around so that I could use you to bring the Order at the right moment. And look! There's the Order. Do you know what that mean for you?"

"Avada Kedavra," says Crouch—but the adult Crouch, Percy realises, familiar enough with the other man's face to recognize it even partially blocked by the mask, as Barty sags to the floor next to him, his eyes unseeing.

He's next, Percy realises in a second, and launches himself away from the desk with just enough time to escape the lurid green Killing Curse that Crouch sends his way. In the next second he's on his feet, engaged in a duel with Crouch. Though Crouch must be woozy from his imprisonment, not to mention whatever entanglement he escaped with Neville and the others, his curses crackle with hatred and energy. Every third spell is a Killing Curse, though Percy luckily is adept enough at conjuring wooden beams that he can deflect most of them.

“You killed your son,” Percy says as he blocks another green beam. He hopes it’ll rattle Crouch, but Crouch bares his teeth at him and sends another Killing Curse his way. “Your own flesh and blood, and you killed him.”

“You’ll be next,” hisses Crouch, pressing forward. Percy takes three quick steps back, twisting his body to duck away from Crouch’s next spell. “All of you Death Eaters deserve to die.”

Percy casts a blindness spell that Tom had taught him, but Crouch dodges it as if it was nothing. He keeps taking steps back, twisting and turning to avoid all of the spells that he can, but his shield charm is flicking from the exertion. Percy has not been in a duel, a real duel, in many years, and his inexperience is starting to show. He looks around him desperately, but of course nobody in the Order will help him, and neither will any of the Death Eaters. Everyone else in the room is oriented around Dumbledore and Voldemort, locked in a duel with Harry in the middle.

He’s on his own.

Crouch lands a spell on him, though luckily not a Killing Curse, and Percy lets out a screech of pain as the spell sears off the arm of his robes and sends flames licking down his arm. For a second, all Percy can feel is pain, serious pain, pain burning into his skin, the smell of his arm hair scorching, the feeling of intense heat—and then he thinks suddenly of McGonagall and is able to gasp out a flame freezing charm.

But in the five seconds it took Percy to remember the spell, the flames nearly reached his wrist, and Crouch has him backed against the wall.

Feel his magic, says Tom, urgently. Percy hisses as his magic flexes around them, jolting against Crouch’s, the taste of rotten wine filling Percy’s mouth and lingering on his tongue. ***He’s nothing compared to you, Percy. Just kill him and get it over with.***

“Send my son your regards,” Crouch hisses nastily, and Percy has only one second to react.

No. Percy lashes out with his magic, lashes out at Tom’s laughter in his head, at the hated face of Crouch, so emblematic for Percy of the stress and suffering of the last year.

But the magic that Percy summons is not tinged with green. In fact, Percy had not thought of a spell at all, caught in the indecision between Tom’s soft tones and his own revulsion, settling in now that the exhilaration of his first kill has worn off. He lashes out instinctively, and Crouch crumples without a sound, without an indication of whether Percy had killed him or merely stunned him, without revealing to Percy whether he is instinctively a murderer, now, or whether he is still salvageable.

Percy swallows against the nausea that is rapidly building in his throat. He’d cast the spell without thinking, an instinctive reaction against the pain and the fear and the hatred that welled up inside of him at the thought that *Crouch* would be the one to kill him, but it is different to see Crouch’s body in front of him. He feels no exhalation, only fear and sadness and a scream in the back of his head that he needs *help*. For a second he makes a half-

movement toward Crouch's body, and then he hesitates, unwilling to cast the charm that would inform him if Crouch is still alive.

He hears Ron's bellow, and swallowing against the tears clogging his throat, Percy looks up. With his good arm he supports himself against the desk, his burned arm still desperately clutching the useless quills.

Harry is on the floor, under the Dark Lord's wand, screaming in agony. Dumbledore is crouched behind him, whispering intently into his ears, and he sees Ron start to break away from the duel and run to Harry. As if he were dreaming, Percy has a vision of Ron running directly into a Killing Curse, and he grips the quills in his hand so tightly that one of them breaks.

And then Harry screams, a long, tortured sound, a sound so piercing and horrendous that everyone's attention snaps to the Chosen One, convulsing madly on the floor under the Dark Lord's wand. Percy grips the quills even tighter, wondering if this is it, this is the moment that shows him how harshly he's failed, but the next second Harry opens his eyes and stares hotly into the Dark Lord's face. "You'll never understand, and I'm sorry for you," he spits out nonsensically, and Dumbledore smiles in relief.

"Be gone, Tom," Dumbledore commands, and with an inarticulate cry of rage the Dark Lord sends a wave of magic toward Harry and Dumbledore. Dumbledore raises his hand to block it and sends it instead to the far wall, where it explodes just enough of the wall to reveal a bewildered Fudge and several of his cronies, standing in the room next over."

"It's him!" says Fudge, idiotically. Malfoy mutters a command to the rest and they sprint through the hole that the Dark Lord blew in the far wall. The rest of the Order follows, though Remus drops to his knees besides Tonks. Percy wants to stay, he really does, but he is very cognizant that he is wearing Death Eater robes. With his absolute last vestiges of strength, he grips the handful of broken quills.

"Portus," he gasps out, and he reappears in the grass of the Burrow, retching onto the ground.

***

He killed someone.

Maybe he'd killed two someones. Two adult wizards, and he'd ended their lives as neatly as if they were mice.

If he'd killed Crouch, it wasn't premeditated, wasn't planned. Maybe he could argue it was self defence, but Crouch had come close enough that Percy could have had a reasonable chance of getting past his shields with a strong enough spell. He could have chosen any other

spell. He could have chosen anything. Why not Imperio? He could have chosen *anything*. What if he chose death?

If he'd killed Crouch, then the Light side had lost an ally. It would mean that Percy had worn the Death Eater robes and the Death Eater mask and behaved as a Death Eater. He'd helped his family, to the extent he could, but he hadn't helped Tonks. He has no idea if Sirius survived.

Even if he hadn't killed Crouch…he'd still *killed* someone.

Percy looks around him, at the soft green grass of the Burrow, at his familiar childhood home, at the few stray chickens still pecking in the dirt despite his family's absence, and begins to cry, great loud gobs of tears, sobs that shake his whole body and splash wetly on the ground. At this moment he's not ashamed of his heritage, not angry at his family, not too prideful to ask for help. He is only alone, so alone that it burns coldly through his body, so alone that he does not even know why he bothers to keep living, day after day.

He's killed someone, and he's a murderer, and nobody even knows, because not a single person in that room cared if he was dead or alive. Even Barty had only been using him; even Dumbledore, for all his prowess, had not noticed Percy behind the mask; even his own family had showed up to fight for Harry without any regard for their own safety.

"I'm sorry, Mum," Percy whispers to the echoing silence of the Burrow, choking over the words as tears burn a trail down his cheeks. "I'm so, so, sorry. I don't know how this happened."

Though of course he knows how it happened. Of course he knows that he's been flirting with the Dark Arts for years, opening himself up arrogantly to their power. Tom has been in his flat for months. And Tom has been in his head for much longer.

Percy had long dismissed his tendency to think of Tom in his head as a twisted version of his own inner voice. Everyone speaks to themselves occasionally. Percy thinks of Aunt Muriel's voice in his head when he picks out robes, and his mother's voice in his head when he struggles to cook, and McGonagall's voice when he studies magical theory. It makes sense that he would think of Tom when he had killed Bellatrix Lestrange.

For all of his worry, his preparation, his nerves and adrenaline, it had been rather easy, in the end. He'd pointed his wand and steeled his soul and the spell had whooshed out of his wand as easily as a *Lumos*. They always said that to cast the Unforgivables you had to *mean* it, really *mean* it, and for the Cruciatus he supposes it is true; but the Imperius and the Killing Curse both gave him hardly any trouble at all.

Either everything he had been told was false, or he *does* really mean it and is refusing to see that.

Had he given his soul up to the Dark and not noticed? How could that even be possible? He would have noticed, wouldn't he? It is true that not many Dark wizards prove to be adept with the Unforgivables, but Percy could see that being a function of their lack of magical skill. The Unforgivables take precision and power to be sure—but hatred?

He sighs and covers his face with his hands, unable to bear the sight of the Burrow, so peaceful and quiet in the warm summer day. He's avoiding the main issue, that his subconscious would conjure up Tom when he is attempting Dark magic.

But maybe Tom *had* been in his head.

He does not think that the portrait could possess him. He isn't interacting with it, except for communication, and if portraits could possess those that spoke to it, Hogwarts would be far more dangerous of a place to be. The diary could possess him because he gave it his own words. He invited Tom in. He hadn't done that with the portrait, had he?

But you wore the diadem, he reminds himself, fighting to stay calm around the coil of panic beginning to simmer in his stomach. *And you painted the portrait. You speak to it every day.*

If Tom is possessing him, that would explain why he was so proficient with the Dark Arts.

Percy lets out a groan and pushes himself to his feet. Tom isn't possessing him. The diary was destroyed, and voice long preceded the diadem. Even the terror of being possessed would be preferably to the knowledge that he, Percy Weasley, is good at Dark magic. He killed a woman, and he does not even feel bad about it. He's glad that Bellatrix is dead. Her death loosens some of the ever-present dread he carries with him creased into the lines of his shoulders at all times. Her death may make it easier to get to a Horcrux. Her death makes his siblings safer, insofar as the Dark Lord lost a valuable follower. Her death may have blown Percy's cover, but he can deal with that if it becomes necessary.

He doesn't feel guilty about killing her. She didn't deserve to live. Why should she wield magic, torture others, have the Dark Lord's ear? She would have languished in Azkaban for the rest of her life if not for Voldemort's return. If she is allowed to kill others for her own enjoyment, why can Percy not kill her for his own noble goals?

This is war, and we fight according to the rules of battle, he reminds himself. *And if I am good at Dark magic, that does not mean I am a Dark wizard. I am good at all magic.*

But he's *not* good at all magic. He's not good at the Patronus—or the Cruciatus. He's not particularly good at duelling. Magic is just magic, isn't it?

Isn't it?

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"What happened?" Tom asks impatiently the moment that Percy appears in his flat, though he'd tried his hardest to clear the tears from his face, and stow the Death Eater robes inside his messenger bag, and adopt as stoic of an expression as he was able.

Percy opens his mouth to lie, and he cannot. Not to Tom, not even now. He needs someone who may understand, who may know what to say. Tom is the only person… *thing* …that

Percy has to consult, and by Merlin he needs the help.

"I killed someone."

"Congratulations," says Tom. "Was it the person you needed to kill?"

Percy blinks. He'd known, of course, that Tom wouldn't react with horror; but to be *congratulated* was something else entirely.

(In its box in Percy's bedroom, the kitten meows piteously. Percy flinches at the sound.)

"I suppose," he says after a second. "One was. The other was threatening me, but he would have been—useful to me. I…lost control. I don't even know if I killed him. I just…lashed out with my magic."

Tom nods thoughtfully. Percy catches the movement out of the corner of his eye, but he can't look directly at Tom, not yet. He looks instead at his rug, his nice expensive rug which has been through so much strife already. The ink stains dotting the corner look uncomfortably like blood.

"It doesn't do to kill thoughtlessly," Tom says to his surprise. "You grow accustomed to it. It seems to present such an easy solution; but it can catch up to you."

Percy thinks of how many people the Dark Lord has killed, will kill, and has to cough out a shaky laugh. "What do you mean?"

He watches Tom as Tom's expression grows distant. "Killing is so *easy*," he says, his voice almost languid in the pleasure of recollecting some memory unknown to Percy. "There are so many people that are so *stupid*. You can kill them and the world wouldn't even notice their absence. It's like this. When you are young, you believe the world has a certain order, yes? We are born to a mother and a father and we believe we are entitled to their love. We grow and believe we are entitled to a fair and just education, to the respect of our peers. We age and believe our worth should come from within. There is a set order of things, or at least, that's what we're told."

"But—"

"But it's a lie," Tom agrees, his expression pitying. "It is a lie meant to keep us complacent. There is no natural order of things, no objective truth, no Muggle almighty God. There is only the power we create for ourselves. To kill someone who does not deserve to live is not cruel, but necessary."

Percy swallows and asks softly, "How does it catch up to you?"

"To kill is to pay a price," Tom says, refocusing on Percy. "It is to assert your dominance over another man, to play God. You must be worthy of that price, or it will destroy you. I have seen it happen to lesser men."

"Myrtle was the first person you killed, right?"

Tom nods, a self-satisfied expression flickering across his face so quickly that Percy almost misses it. It reminds him of his Tom, the sixteen year old one, parading memories triumphantly in front of Percy for his approval. “And with her death I created my first Horcrux,” he says fondly. “What a rush that was. To kill for the first time—to feel that power—to hold in my hand a portion of my own soul…”

Tom trails off meditatively, shaking his head.

“Who was the second?” Percy dares to ask, some of his own horror abated by his curiosity.

“My father. In a way that was my first *real* kill, you know. I commanded the basilisk to end Myrtle’s life, but I did not take her life in my hands myself.”

An old mystery, revealed casually. Tom had killed his father and framed his uncle for it. But why? To create another Horcrux? Out of malice?

“So watch yourself, Percy,” Tom continues, coming out of his reverie to peer down at where Percy is still standing, stock still, clutching his bag to steady himself. “You succeeded today, but you are playing with power you yourself lack. If you are not careful, you will lose yourself to it.”

Each time Percy wakes that night, his heart pounding, Tonks’ scream echoing in his ears and the feeling of his wand in his hand as green spills from the tip, he thinks to himself, *but what if I already have?*

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Though the scream in Percy’s muscles echoes loudly in the still, quiet morning, he pulls himself out of bed, dresses in his nice Ministry robes, and braves the chaos of the Ministry. His face is puffy and raw, despite the Glamours he’d layered over his skin. His body aches, like on the rare occasions as a child where he fell ill with flu, before his body was mature enough to handle Pepperup. Those days feel very far away now.

“No, I was not here,” he says more than once, shaking his head mournfully. “Bank holiday, you know. *Dreadful* to hear about the Dementors. Were you here? No? Glad we escaped it, anyhow.”

Fudge is under a tremendous amount of fire, of course. He’s pinning the whole mess on Crouch, which ought to make Barty happy, wherever he is in the afterlife. Finding the Department Head in Death Eater robes, stunned in company with a dead Lestrange, is sensational enough for Fudge to quickly take advantage. Crouch let in the Death Eaters; Crouch let in the Dementors; Crouch is evil, and Fudge can exist without reproach.

(When Percy hears that Crouch is alive, he has to excuse himself to the loo, to sag against the cold tiles in relief, the enchanted mirror inquiring after his health in a worried tone. Perhaps

he ought to have thought more of Bellatrix, but his fear that he'd *instinctively* killed, that his body had thought to kill before it thought to stun, had successfully distracted him for most of the morning. He may be a murderer but at least he is only a murderer when under duress, right?)

Percy spends much of the morning dispiritedly writing a draft of the speech that Fudge is going to give at noon. He is going to say that Fudge was aware of the Dark Lord's return, of course, but *chose* to keep it silent as to not alert the public. He is sorry for this mistake—it is important for politicians to acknowledge their wrongs, or at least a version of their wrongs—but he took the time to secretly prepare an Auror task-force, led by Scrimgeor and Moody. The words flow easily out of Percy's quill while he struggles against the exhaustion in the back of his head. This is such a waste of *time.*

Act, before it's too late, whispers Tom, and Percy shudders, banishing the memory to the back of his mind. He will have to better confront the events of yesterday, but not now, not in the Ministry, not when so much still hangs by a thread.

Percy does not see the speech be performed, however, because he spends his lunch hour being interrogated by a pair of stocky looking Aurors.

Percy worked under Crouch for nearly two years, the female Auror explains to him, holding her wand threateningly in his face. Is Percy a traitor?

Percy, to their surprise, solves the problem by offering to take a few drops of Veritaserum. Perhaps that was a rash move for him to make, but he has spent the same two years speaking half-truths to everyone he meets. He thinks he can best these two.

"I had no idea that Mr. Crouch, Sr. was a Death Eater," Percy repeats obediently. "He did not share any of his plans with me. I barely spoke to him during my time as his assistant."

True, true, all true, all bloody true, thanks to the *senior* that Percy tacks onto every statement. These Aurors must be amateurs; they ask Percy only if he *saw* who killed Crouch, to which he said no very truthfully, not if he *knew* who killed Crouch. If the Aurors know of the younger Crouch's role in the deranged, tragic play, they do not ask Percy, and Percy does not volunteer the information. He wonders whether they've yet dosed Crouch, or whether Crouch will tell the truth of his own accord, or whether he will take the secret of his son's double infidelity to the grave. Though—surely they found Barty's body in the chaos?

Thus cleared of suspicion, Percy stops by the Auror's office, but he is informed crisply by yet another surly Auror that Tonks is in hospital and cannot receive visitors. Thus the day makes way to afternoon, and Percy is sitting by himself, listening to the faint sounds of Fudge bellowing angrily at someone, and feeling very alone. When he closes his eyes he sees the green flash of his wand and the laughter of Bellatrix cut short, sees Crouch pointing his wand at his own son, sees Tonks crumpling to the floor. He tries to keep his eyes open, but he does not always succeed.

He is so tired, so numb, so entirely exhausted that he does not notice when, on his walk to the Floo stations after work, a man brushes up against him and grabs his wand. He feels the

familiar squish of Apparation and panics, but it's too late. A second later he finds himself squeezed through a tube and deposited on a dirty Muggle street, facing Severus Snape.

"Again, Weasley, you would be dead had I wanted to," Snape says with some irritation. "You must have your guard up at *all times*."

Percy only shrugs. He can't focus past the incessant pounding in his head. What if Tonks died? What if Lucius comes to kill him? What if Dumbledore? None of it matters, none of it, and he is so bloody tired…!

Snape slaps him very firmly across the face. Percy blinks and raises a hand to his smarting cheek, able to focus on Snape properly for the first time.

"Why did you kidnap me? Also, ouch."

"Lucius Malfoy has reported to the Dark Lord that he has been cultivating you for the past few years, with his wife's aid," says Snape, very precisely. "He said that he tasked you with overseeing Bartemius Crouch, and that you succeeded. The Dark Lord is *very* interested to meet you."

Whatever apathy had been clouding Percy's mind is abruptly replaced with panic. He drops his hand from his cheek and gapes at Snape, mind roving over the revelation that Snape had dropped smoothly into the air between them. "*What?"*

"I, of course, stepped in and said that whatever credit was due for *cultivating* you, dubious of an asset as you may be, belonged entirely to me, as your mentor since you were thirteen, but I had been worried about your proximity to Dumbledore and not yet deemed it appropriate to bring you in for an introduction," Snape says. Something about the calm way he delivers these words informs Percy that he is furious, and rightfully so. "Nevertheless, He is demanding an audience. I am to bring you there tomorrow."

"I can't go," Percy says desperately. "Snape, please."

"You were *there*, wearing the robes, under Lucius' apparent protection," Snape shouts, his voice rising on the last, a sign of how close to losing control he is. "You have no *choice*, you bloody imbecile, unless you flee right now." He takes a deep breath and visibly calms himself, looking at Percy. In a much softer voice, he continues. "Weasley. Percy. You should go. You have done your part; you have sent yourself back through time, alerted me to the Horcruxes, and even destroyed one. You should flee this country and not return til the war is through. Otherwise you will die. You have not the skill to parry with the Dark Lord."

For a second, Percy considers it: considers letting down his burden, returning Tom to Snape, going to live in America or Argentina or Australia. Then he shakes his head. "I can't."

Snape shakes his head in resignation. "Come," he says. "My house is not yet under surveillance. We will talk more there."

Snape's house is barely a house: more of a dirty, ramshackle residence, a supremely ugly house filled with dust and dirt and not least the suggestion of quite a few bugs. Snape sees the

look on Percy's face and laughs dryly. "I spend little time here."

"I can see why," says Percy primly.

The sofa inside the parlour is clean, however, and so are the cups with which Snape serves tea. Percy takes the time to try and clear his head, which proves to be impossible. Every time he blinks he sees eyes: Tom's eyes, dark and mysterious; Bellatrix, her eyes the same shade of grey as her sister and her cousin; Crouch, both of them, sharing the same deep brown; and Voldemort, his gaze red and amused, scalding like a mis-cast heating charm on a cold day.

"Tell me about what happened," Snape orders when the tea has been made and duly served. Percy tries to take a fortifying sip of tea, but his throat is tight, and the hot water slips dully down his throat. Swallowing, he forces it down and then retells the whole sordid tale to Snape, who listens without expression until the revelation that Percy was the one who had killed Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Congratulations," says Snape in an eerie echo of Tom. "You've felled one of the most powerful followers of the Dark Lord."

"I *killed* her, Snape!" Percy exclaims, and suddenly it all pours out of him. "I killed her, just like that. I just saw her and I said the words and she *died*. Because of me!"

"Again, my congratulations," says Snape, raising an eyebrow. "I did not know you had such an act inside of you."

"Snape, I'm being serious," pleads Percy. "I *killed* her, Snape. Not even in a duel; I was *hiding*, like a coward, and I heard Tonks scream, and then I just pointed my wand at her and she *died*."

He stops, his chest heaving, but Snape only looks back at him coolly, his grave expression giving no hint of whether he feels Percy should truly be proud of himself, or ashamed, or something else entirely. Percy searches Snape's gaze and finds nothing with which to steady himself on, which makes him feel oddly rattled and off-balance. "And you feel guilt?"

"I don't feel anything. Snape, I don't feel *anything*. Oh, I'm glad Tonks didn't die, but I feel *nothing* about Bellatrix Lestrange!"

Snape takes a sip of his own tea, slowly, calmly, and then regards Percy over the top of the cup. "This is war," he says quietly but intently, his black eyes gleaming. Percy's panicked breath catches in his throat and stills. "She was an enemy to you. If she had killed you, all of our plans would have been for naught. It is better for you to feel nothing. It is safer for you that way. If we survive this war, Percy, we will mourn for those we've killed, but we will feel *nothing* about it until that day except pride that we are achieving our goals, is that understood?"

Percy swallows back a sob and nods, focusing desperately on Snape's words as if they were a lifeline.

“To kill is to harm your soul,” Snape continues, his voice low but steady. “We know this. We know that we will have to earn repentance—in this life, or the next, it matters not. But to kill without meaning; to kill without finishing the task we are killing for; to murder senselessly and thoughtfully...that is what will truly harm you, in the end.”

“So we can kill, if we do it for the job,” Percy says, and something about that eases the tightness in his chest.

Snape nods slowly. “If we finish our job, we will save hundreds from death or worse. After we do that, you can worry about your little soul all you want, you can decide whether the lives you took were worth the lives you saved.”

“But if we don’t finish, the lives we took will be for naught.”

“Yes.”

Percy nods again, taking another sip of tea, which slithers softly down his throat without pause. “I had some nightmares,” he admits, glancing away, “and today I thought of it often. But I don’t feel…I mean, what kind of person am I if I don't...I don't feel *anything*.”

“You will, one day,” says Snape. “It does not hit you all at once, like in a story. It will build, slowly and inexorably, and you will have to constantly measure yourself against the guilt and decide to conquer it.”

“Who was the first person you killed?” He asks, the same way he asked Tom last night.

To his surprise, Snape answers him. “A Muggle. You will find out soon—at the Death Eater’s initiation, you are expected to display Dark Magic and prove your worth.”

“How did you kill him?” Percy asks cautiously, not wanting to think about having to *find out soon* what that will be like.

“I killed her with a Killing Curse,” Snape says quietly. “The Dark Lord had been encouraging me to try an Unforgivable. I had spoken to him before my initiation, several times; in those days he recruited promising talent personally. He told me the curse would be easy—”

“—like blowing out a candle,” Percy says with Snape. They share a pregnant pause, and in that glance something like understanding passes between them, something like having been recruited by the same charismatic boy, something like acknowledging the same restless desires in their souls.

Snape’s lips quirk and he looks down at his tea. “I suppose he reuses the same material,” he says dryly. “I assure you at the time I felt very special, singled out by his interest.”

Percy can understand that. “Was it different? K-killing a Muggle?”

At this question, Snape leans forward, and Percy looks up, surprised at the movement. “You think it would be different?”

Percy gives an uncomfortable shrug, caught in the question. “My mother kills animals all the time,” he says, muddling through his response, unable to articulate what he means.

Snape gives an incredulous laugh, which lands on Percy’s skin like droplets of burning ash. “I hope that your parents never hear you ask that question,” he says darkly, “nor Albus, or you will never be redeemed in their eyes.”

“But Muggles *are* different,” protests Percy, defensive. “I do not think they are lesser, just… different.”

“You do not know what you think because you have never had to think about it,” Snape snaps back. “I will correct your assumption, Weasley, and let me not see you make the same mistake again. I grew up with Muggles; my father was the worst Muggle I’ve ever met, but her parents were the best that I have known. I studied with them, lived with them, and still see them now, in this godforsaken town. Let me clear: the only difference between Muggles and wizards is their ability to use magic.”

“But—” Percy begins, thinking of souls, of a magical core, of the way Roberts’ neighborhad had seemed so flat and colourless, his memories blurred.

“It is no easier to kill a Muggle than a wizard,” Snape says, each word vicious, like the slice of a blade on Percy’s skin. “It is to the pureblood’s advantage to pretend otherwise, to act as though Muggles are little more than animals, worthy of either protection or exploitation, but animals nevertheless.”

Percy tries to say something but then falls silent, his words caught in his throat. Even when Arthur speaks of Muggles it is with a childlike wonder, like how Charlie speaks of dragons or Bill of goblins, with respect but yet acknowledgement that they are something to be studied, something to be kept separate, something fundamentally *different*.

“You will see,” says Snape. “Sooner, rather than later, if you are not to flee his service.”

Percy swallows. “So I will have to go to him?”

“He will want you in his ranks, though I imagine not immediately. He will suspect you, of course. You are a Weasley; your family is notably under Dumbledore’s protection. But the prospect of stealing away one of the Light children will be irresistible to him, particularly with Lucius and my joint approval.”

“Do you think I can prove to him that he can trust me?”

“You will be able to try, but you will have to commit to it,” says Snape soberly. “He will initially seek to separate you from your family; it would be far too easy for you to betray him if he sent you to interact with your family as a spy. He will likely give you to Lucius, or to me, if I can convince him. It will mean participating in his raids, carrying out his errands. You will have to kill, or harm, or scare, often without reason, or justification.”

Percy swallows again. His throat is very dry, and the sip of tea he attempts goes no better than the first. “We may find out something about the Horcruxes.”

“Unlikely. You must understand that he will rarely speak to you directly; you are too junior, and too much of a risk. But it will give you and I an excuse to meet more frequently. I will suggest to him that you stay in the Ministry; Lucius is a spy there, but Lucius will be in Azkaban before the day is out.”

“He’ll allow himself to be captured?”

Snape smiles humorlessly. “Lucius is powerful, but even he cannot evade an entire Auror squad, particularly after the Minister denounced him by name in his press release.” Percy flinches; he’d written most of that press release, but he had not known that Fudge would mention Lucius by name. “It does not matter much; the Dark Lord will allow him to languish there for a few months as punishment, and then he will break him out when he has need of him. In the meantime the Dark Lord will enjoy being the king of Lucius’ manor.”

Abraxas’ manor. Yes, Tom would enjoy that, particularly if Lucius was in Azkaban.

“The Dark Lord has need of an intelligent spy in the Ministry. It is your arena of expertise. You know what will come and so will be able to pre-empt it and prove yourself to him.”

Percy nods slowly. Aside from the terrifying prospect of *proving himself useful* to the Dark Lord, this is not too different than what he had planned originally. He feels a pang at the knowledge that he will have to cut off ties permanently to his family, but he had been dithering between the two options for months. It is somewhat of a relief to have a firm plan to follow.

“What happened, last night? With the Order?”

From Snape, Percy learns the following:

The Order had been trapped outside, alerted by Tonks and Moody nearly immediately but unable to penetrate the Ministry’s wards without the ward-key. They had been on the east entrance and so completely missed Harry and his friends entering through the Muggle portal.

(They had flown thestrals, apparently. *Thestrals.* Where had they even found six thestrals?)

Dumbledore had arrived shortly after, creating a hole just wide enough in the wards for the Order to follow while they all made physical contact with each other, Dumbledore at the lead. Percy imagines the Order holding hands like a line of schoolchildren and has to roll his eyes. Not a single one of them had thought of Portkeys—or of trying the Muggle entrance.

There had been a fierce and protracted battle with the Death Eaters inside, while Dumbledore and the Dark Lord tore up most of the hallways outside the Department of the Mysteries with their spells. Tonks, Remus, Sirius, and Moody had accompanied Dumbledore to the Department of Mysteries, while Bill and Kingsley went to round up the Dementors. True to Barty’s word, only three Ministry employees were killed, though the remainder were treated for severe shock and anxiety.

Somehow none of them had noticed Percy in the fray; Bellatrix’s death was being attributed to a stray curse, likely thrown by Lupin. (Here, Percy feels for a second a desperate longing

to claim her death as his, before he tampers down harshly on that feeling. Secrets are kept best by one). The Death Eaters had taken Barty's body with them, though left Crouch, clad in the robes and mask, to stir some confusion.

"He'll be dead before the evening as well," says Snape, flaring his nostrils. "The Dark Lord does not like loose ends, nor ones that could implicate him."

(Percy thinks of Crouch saving Percy by killing his own son and fights down another pang. Had Crouch—the real Crouch—ever even spoken to Percy? If Crouch had fled, he may still be alive. Percy had all but killed him, even if he hadn't cast the curse himself. Does *that* make him a murderer?)

The Dark Lord had tried to possess Harry but failed; and the Minister, finally roused, had disabled the wards on the Ministry and seen the Dark Lord in all his reptilian glory.

"And Tonks?"

"Your Tonks is still in hospital, though I believe she will be fine, though significantly weakened for the next few months," Snape confirms. "Black is in a coma, unlikely—I hope—to awaken. Bella managed to land a nasty curse on him before you killed her."

"And the Dark Lord?"

"I will take you to the Dark Lord, and you will tell him exactly what I tell you to say." Snape hesitates and then says, "Weasley. You will be tortured."

Percy shivers. "I know."

"We should have begun training for this earlier, but I thought we may have more time," Snape says, as if in apology. "I will teach you what I can, but I need you to take an Unbreakable Vow not to mention our secrets."

Percy knows what this means. If he is forced to give up any of this information during torture, the Vow will take over and kill him before he can reveal the full truth.

He swallows. "I knew the risks," he says, meeting Snape's eyes solidly. "I'll make the Vow."

In the next second, Percy tenses instinctively as Snape's face closes off. His next words only confirm that Percy was correct to be on his guard. "I am going to bring you to Albus as well. He will be our Bonder."

"*What?"*

"Percy. You cannot do this alone," Snape says, once again speaking very precisely, though Percy feels abruptly that Snape is *sorry* for him, rather than angry. "I know your thoughts on Albus…I even agree with some of them, and I have felt it more prudent to keep you separate from him up until now. But you cannot face off with the Dark Lord without the support of the Order."

“But why?” Percy argues obstinately, more from shock than anything else. “I can’t go around telling people I’m in the Order. If anything, being in the Order will just paint a greater target on my back.”

“But there will be a time where you will need help,” Snape says softly, and Percy closes his mouth with a click at the pained expression creeping across Snape’s face like mist over the moors. “You will fail, or you will be hurt, or you will need another wand beside your own. And when that time comes, you will not be able to go to me, not if I am entangled in my own mission. Albus will be able to help you, or he will connect you to the person who can. I know what you think of him, Weasley, but Albus is not evil, nor is the Order a fool’s errand. Albus is singularly focused on the Dark Lord’s demise, as are we; but his methods are different. That should not preclude us from working with him when we can. If you disdain his help any longer, you are signing your own death warrant, and I would do better to kill you right now, so that you die at a controlled time, rather than when we would hope to rely on you the most.”

Percy stays silent long enough to finish his tea, and then also to let his eyes rove around every detail of the room, until he has no choice but to look again at Snape. Then, an outburst, one last objection: “Oh, Merlin, this will be so *embarrassing.”*

To his surprise, Snape snorts out a laugh, or something in the general proximity of an expression of humour. “Albus will not gloat to your face, though I cannot promise he will not be condescending. But it is better to be embarrassed than to be dead, and I cannot protect you alone. Not if you are going to stand in front of the Dark Lord.”

“And you’ll be there?” Percy says anxiously.

Snape’s brow furrows slightly. “You wish me to be there while you speak to Albus? You will not be…embarrassed?”

Percy shrugs one shoulder. “At this point, I rather think you’ve seen the worst of me,” he says truthfully. “Or at least heard of it from Myrtle.”

Snape rolls his eyes. “That bloody ghost,” he mutters, though without any real heat. Then he stands and banishes the tea things back to the kitchen. “Now come. You need only face Albus if you plan to survive the Dark Lord, and there is much to be done to prepare you for *Him.″*

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Nobody checks on Percy all day. He supposes he should perhaps go back to the Ministry; it is Sunday, but the Sunday after an attack, so Fudge is undoubtedly there steaming away. Instead he sleeps the day away, not even emerging from his room to speak to Tom, subsiding off some of the crisps he has stowed away in his bedside drawer for the times that he wakes in the middle of the night, stressed and ravenously hungry.

He sleeps so much that he feels tired anew at four, when he tries to decide what to wear to face the Order and then meet the Dark Lord in quick succession. After deliberating over his wardrobe, he picks out the most expensive robes he owns, the ones Aunt Muriel had tailored for him to wear to the Greengrass summer party. Luckily they still fit, and he tries to stand straight in them, like a pureblood heir would, rather than hunched over like a scared little boy.

Wearing the robes, he walks into the main room. Tom eyes him but does not comment, returning to whatever notes he is scratching into his painted notebook. Percy has an excuse ready if Tom asks—a date—but he finds he does not need to use it. He heats up a sad bowl of takeaway and eats it at his small kitchen table, more for sustenance than anything else, trying to fix his mind on the task ahead.

Percy is not being asked to join the Death Eaters—yet, though Snape was clear that he should consider his entry an eventual requirement. The Dark Lord does not like powerful young men that are not under his control. Rather, Snape is to present Percy as a young protegé, someone of interest to the cause. Percy will have to seem young and thirsty for power, but easily malleable.

Be yourself, he counsels himself. *The version of yourself you are around Tom*. After all, two versions of Tom have accepted Percy so far. Who is to say the third version won't as well?

He returns to his room, fed, and sits cross-legged on his bed, back against the wall. Closing his eyes, he breathes out slowly, carefully, and steadily. He has thirty minutes before Snape is due to fetch him, and he intends to use them well.

He enters the state of calm required to visualise one's Occlumency defences and drops into the centre of them as if they were real bookshelves rising from all corners of the vast and limitless room that is his mental library. Snape had said it unlikely that Dumbledore will press at his shields with enough force to break through them, so Percy focuses on building the mask he will need to present to the Dark Lord rather than to his old Headmaster. Shelf by shelf, he traverses his memories and picks dangerous ones to hide beneath the floorboards, like he used to do with his secrets in the Burrow. Away go the golden bound memories of his first seven years at Hogwarts, away go the dark maroon volumes of his second seven too. The dark blue, embossed tomes that speak of Tom—those are buried as deep as he can make them, inaccessible and hopefully unobtrusive. Instead, he picks a few books to leave out, strewn around his mental library for easy access. Practicing Dark magic, brewing with Snape, fighting with his parents, speaking to Barty.

Lastly, he packs away his panic, represented by brittle spiky chandeliers dotting the ceiling with shards of glass and blazes of light. With a grunt, he forces them to change to flickering candles, still full of nervous energy, but less liable to shatter. Oh he is most certainly panicked; one may even say he is terrified out of his wits. Tonight, he is doing the most dangerous thing he has done in either lifetime. No longer will he be allowed to stay in the shadows; by donning the mask and the robe and whispering his first Killing Curse, Percy has damned himself to walk the fine line between *traitor* and *spy* for as long as the Dark Lord is alive.

Once the panic is gone, he realises with a start that he feels a frisson of *anticipation*, judging from the way dark vines creep up the library walls and threaten to bloom. Percy can adapt to

situations, can take advantage of them and wear the requisite masks. He's ready, he realises, to take *action*, to move with purpose now that the constraints of the timeline no longer entrap him.

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Perhaps some might have thought that facing Albus Dumbledore would be easier than facing the Dark Lord himself—but not Percy. If anything, Percy is hoping, premature as the thought may be, that perhaps it will be *easy* to face Voldemort, at least because Percy knows precisely who he ought to be when he kneels at the Dark Lord's feet. Arrogant, insecure, needy; talented, directionless, compliant. Percy knows Tom, even if he cannot quite make out Tom in the Dark Lord's scaly features. Percy knows Tom, and he knows what Tom wants from him.

But Dumbledore…

Percy has never figured out what Dumbledore wants from him, not in either timeline, not in over three decades of life. Dumbledore has never been interested in Percy. Even when Percy was Head Boy, he'd hardly exchanged more than a few cursory words with Dumbledore, interfacing most often with McGonagall and the other Heads of House. In this timeline, Percy has an uncomfortable idea that he knows precisely what Dumbledore already thinks of him, and he cringes at the thought of debasing himself so openly in front of the other man.

But confront him he must, and so Percy is waiting for Snape at the allotted time, his face smooth and impassive. They do not talk as they make their way up to the castle; the woods may be listening, and anyway, Percy does not have anything to say. He takes deep, measured breaths through his nose as they cross over the great iron gates of Hogwarts and into the warmth of the castle, fighting to quell the pit of anxiety forming in his stomach with every step.

Snape pauses right outside the Headmaster's office, turning to face Percy, and flicking his eyes authoritatively over Percy's body. Percy tenses, waiting for a reprimand, but Snape only gives him a short, brusque nod that he supposes it meant to be reassuring.

They had agreed to not reveal Percy's role as a time traveller, nor his knowledge of the Horcrux, at least until it seems more prudent to do so. But Snape had encouraged Percy to be as truthful as possible, which it occurs to Percy now is the exact same approach he'd mentioned for the meeting with Dark Lord, due to occur in four hours.

Percy smoothes all vestiges of nervousness from his face as the staircase glides smoothly to the top. But he cannot prevent a start of surprise when the door swings open to reveal Dumbledore, Moody, Cedric, and McGonagall, all staring at him with varying degrees of warmth.

“Welcome, my boy,” says Dumbledore, standing from behind his desk. His eyes twinkle, as they are oft to do, and Percy flicks his gaze away instinctively. He waits for the pressure in his mind and finds it just as Snape had predicted, a light fluttering over Percy's shields. Perhaps Dumbledore is surprised by the strength of Percy's mental defenses, and perhaps he is relieved, but either way he withdraws nearly immediately from Percy's mind.

Snape presses his foot against Percy’s ankle, and Percy takes the hint, walking into the room. He lingers awkwardly in the middle, right in front of Dumbledore’s desk, with the three others on his left and Snape on his right. Percy cannot help but be reminded of Harry’s trial, a full year ago now, though he doubts Dumbledore will swoop in to be his saviour just when it seems all hope may be lost.

McGonagall clears her throat, just slightly, and Percy flinches in response. “Thank you for having me, Headmaster,” he says politely, taking the hint for what it was. Turning, he gives a short bow to the others, bending at the waist but not reclining further than a strict thirty degrees. The pureblood bows are likely wasted on Moody, Cedric, and McGonagall, but they give him a measure of structure to rely on, and calm some of the frenetic breathing of his heart. “My thanks to you three as well for attending. Professor; Auror Moody; Cedric.”

Cedric gives him a friendly smile, and even McGonagall inclines her head in turn, though Moody merely pins him with an intense glare, his blue eye swivelling madly as if to rove up and down Percy’s figure.

Dumbledore takes a seat and conjures up chairs for the rest. Percy’s is hard and uncomfortable, but months of taking tea with Narcissa serves him well, and he perches delicately on the end, his spine straight.

“I understand that you have something to say to us all, my boy,” Dumbledore prompts him when it becomes apparent that Percy is not going to begin without cause.

Percy does not look at Snape for reassurance, but he wants to, and he pretends that the shimmer of light near Dumbledore’s window is Myrtle, hovering nearby. Focusing on it, he begins the speech that he had prepared.

“As you all know, I have not approached you, Headmaster, about joining the Order, though the remainder of my family has been inducted as members,” Percy says clearly. “My objections to joining were threefold: I felt there was opportunity for me to grow closer to some of the Death Eaters, which I felt would be challenged by my alignment with the opposite side; I admit I had misgivings about the efficacy of the Order’s methods and was not sure it prudent to join; and I felt slighted by not being explicitly asked to join, which led me in my pride to stay at a distance.”

Here he pauses, but nobody seems to want to question him, which poses a bit of a problem, as he had prepared more extensively for objections, rather than for uninterrupted monologue.

“When I learned that Barty Crouch, Jr. had taken the place of his father, I informed my brother, Bill, the very same day, hoping he would take it back to the Order. He was unable to confirm, of course, but I presume he came to you, Headmaster, or to my parents.”

Dumbledore inclines his head gently. “He spoke to me directly, and I cautioned him not to speak of these matters to anyone else, including the rest of the Order. I apologise if you felt alone, my boy, but you understand we could not inform you that the information had been received.”

Percy smiles tightly. Had he not alluded to the very same point in his previous sentence? But he soldiers on despite his instinctive irritation. “I would have told him to do the same, had I the chance. Of course, between my father’s attack and the attack on the Ministry, I am afraid that my information did not come to much good.”

Here Snape comments silkily, as if to remind Percy to keep his temper in check. “I would agree with Mr. Weasley that we ought to review the Order’s response to the attack on the Ministry, Albus. The Aurors were able to arrive far before the Order.”

Dumbledore smiles enigmatically. “Indeed, Severus. Mr. Weasley, did you have more to continue?”

Percy clenches his toes in his shoes as he smiles pleasantly. “Barty’s close supervision was, of course, quite an ordeal for me to bear.” Here he turns to Cedric, summoning up the courage for the revelation to follow. “I wanted also to apologise to you, Cedric. Barty Crouch killed your father. I wanted to inform you as soon as I found out, but I felt it unwise to reveal what I had learned. I am sorry I did not notice Barty’s impersonation of Mr. Crouch sooner.”

Cedric’s eyes flick to Dumbledore, who, Percy cannot help but notice, looks displeased at Percy’s revelation of Barty’s role in Amos Diggory’s death. “Barty Crouch killed my father? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I had my suspicions, but I was not certain, dear boy,” says Dumbledore, bestowing a grandfatherly smile on Cedric. Cedric seems to miss the smile, however, turning instead to Percy with eyes bright with tears.

“Thank you for letting me know,” Cedric says, leaning forward in his chair as if to reach out for Percy’s arm. He shoots a glance at Dumbledore and then adds pointedly, “And thank you for smuggling me letters all year. The D.A. learned quite a lot from those letters.”

There is a ripple of shock at the revelation that Percy had helped with the DA—Percy resists the urge to smile smugly, instead settling back in his chair—and Dumbledore takes back the reins of conversation quickly.

“My dear boy, I forgive you for your delay in approaching us,” Dumbledore says magnanimously. “I too have been a prideful young man, and I too found it difficult to admit my wrongs. It is bravery worthy of your House to come here today. Severus has often spoken positively of you, as has Minerva, so I would be pleased to have you in the Order if we deem it fit.”

Snape interrupts, his voice dry, “I plan to introduce Mr. Weasley to the Dark Lord. I have brought him here to swear an Unbreakable Vow, with you as our Bonder, Albus.”

"*What?"* McGonagall says loudly, unable to keep silent any more. She turns in her chair and pins Percy with a beady glare, so uncomfortably familiar that Percy shifts in his seat. "Mr. Weasley, what have you done?"

"And we're so sure that he's on our side, eh?" Moody says as well, breaking his silence for the first time.

"Mr. Weasley has acted with subtlety and foresight in establishing himself in the footholds of the Ministry and the Death Eaters simultaneously," Snape snaps back, his robes rustling as he too turns to face Percy. "He correctly identified a gap in the Order's coverage; we have my insights, of course, but the Dark Lord knows that I must report at least partially to Albus, and many of the Death Eaters continue to distrust me. Furthermore, I do not have insight into the Ministry as Mr. Weasley does, positioned so close to the Minister, nor do I have inroads with the younger set of Death Eaters. I have been in communication with him for the entire year. I bring him here to the Order so that he may share these insights with the broader group, not for him to be distrusted."

Moody barks out a laugh. "Trouble is, not sure if a Death Eater's word in these matters means very much, eh, Severus?"

"I would like to hear it from Mr. Weasley," says McGonagall, breaking over Snape's indignant reply. "Mr. Weasley, you and I have worked closely together for quite some time, and I would hope you would have felt comfortable reaching out to me prior to this, yet I have heard nothing from you. I would like to understand why you are now interested in joining the Order, what you are envisioning your involvement will entail, and how you plan to balance your loyalty to the Order with whatever activities your apparent loyalties may require."

Percy nods obediently. As usual, McGonagall has posed the most difficult set of questions—but also the questions most necessary for him to answer, should he hope to win the loyalty of the Order, or at least those in the room.

"To begin, I was not asked to join the Order," he points out, "and I was not sure if your loyalty to the Order would prevent you from speaking to me. I admit that I was not sure a year ago whether to fully believe what Harry had said; not because I mistrust Harry, but because his claim that the Dark Lord had resurrected himself was so unbelievable. I have learned much over the last year that assuaged those doubts, but as I mentioned earlier, I didn't feel it safe for me to be seen talking to anyone affiliated with the Order. I tried in my own way to help, by writing Cedric or speaking to Bill, but I have been feeling for some time that I wanted to be more broadly involved in the Order. I have ideas, many of them, for how to establish safehouses, for defence protocols, for potions we can begin to brew and stockpile, for escape routes we could chart out—" he flushes as he begins to ramble, cutting himself off. "But I think it *will* continue to be true that I cannot be seen in any of your company. And as for the last question…"

Here he trails off, and he finds himself glancing to Snape for help.

Snape gives a short nod, much like the nod he gave outside the door, and says, "It will be difficult but not impossible. That is why I spoke to Albus about widening your group of handlers, as they are called in covert operations such as these. For you to be alone is

dangerous; you will more easily fall to the thrall, or find yourself swept up in matters you cannot escape. You will need to remind yourself of your allies, of your purpose, of your principles, and I believe those in this room will help you do that."

"So we are to keep this a secret from the rest of the Order?" McGonagall interrupts, her voice heavy with unease. "Albus, I do not think this wise. His family—they will think the worst of him."

When attention swings back to Dumbledore, Percy notices with a hint of anxiety that his face is pensive, as if something new has occurred to him. But when the Headmaster talks, his voice is as composed as ever. "I am prepared to welcome Mr. Weasley into the Order. But his involvement must be kept to only those in this room. If he were to be captured, he must not know details that would be dangerous for him to know, and vice versa if any of our members were under interrogation." Here Dumbledore looks to Percy, and Percy cannot look away from the searing blue of his eyes. "Harry trusts you, Mr. Weasley, as do your brothers. But they are young and not capable of subterfuge. I do not believe they will be able to hide their true feelings if asked. Their dislike of you will be your greatest defence."

"So my family will continue to think I am a Death Eater," says Percy, feeling numb. All of this…all of the stress and the worry and the bravery to sit in this room and admit his wrongs…and his family will not know any of it, and he will continue to be hated. In this moment he hates Dumbledore too, and wishes he hadn't bothered to come at all.

"Oh, Albus, surely not," protests McGonagall.

Dumbledore inclines his head slowly. "He will be allowed to Apparate into Headquarters, but only into a single room, warded against entry by anyone else. I trust you will have the subtlety to not reveal your presence to others, Mr. Weasley, though we will allow you access into the rest of the house as you need. Nobody else will know that Mr. Weasley can enter the house."

"But even this one has unlimited access," says Moody, jerking his head to Snape. "Or are we locking him up in a room too?"

"We can re-evaluate Mr. Weasley's access as time passes," says Dumbledore, conciliatory as always. Percy tries to control his irritation. "Mr. Wealsey, you understand these precautions are for your own safety?"

For one long second, Percy wants to respond with a rude rejoinder, or at least a stubborn *no*. Then he looks again to the portraits behind Dumbledore's desk, to the portrait of Phineas Nigellus, to the silver instruments leaning battered and broken against one wall, and then summons all of his courage to say simply, "Yes. These terms are acceptable to me."

The rest of the meeting is anticlimactic; the reveal that the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix are at 12 Grimmauld Place, the non-binding oath that Percy takes to uphold the values of the Order, the Unbreakable Vow he swears to Snape, gripping the other man's hand tightly, not to reveal the secrets of the Order to the Death Eaters, on his life. He receives one gift— *I'm proud of you*, McGonagall says, and he grabs at it and holds the thought

underneath his robes, warm and unexpected—and one curse, when Dumbledore asks him yet again for his money.

“I wish for my money to be used to create a series of safehouses so that Muggleborns can escape the Dark Lord’s occupation when it inevitably occurs,” Percy insists, and perhaps Dumbledore is tired of him because he agrees without much argument.

But when Percy steps outside, Snape politely giving him a few minutes to collect himself, he measures himself against the events of the hour, reaching for the memories and sorting them away in his mind library. To his surprise, he finds that he does not feel very different, now that Cedric and Moody and McGonagall know that he is not truly evil. He feels that in a way they all would have believed in him otherwise, except for perhaps Moody, who has no reason to think positively or negatively of Percy. Thus the victory, as victorious as it may be, feels a bit more empty, especially with the knowledge that his own parents won’t know anything of the role that he plays, and merely because Albus Dumbledore decreed it so.

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He does not have too much time to prepare himself. Snape and he walk down through Hogsmeade, though once out of earshot Snape gives him litany of last minute instructions to keep in mind for the meeting to follow. Percy nods, trying to keep everything in his mind, swallowing the panic that threatens to stain his mouth with bitterness.

“In truth, I think the more difficult meeting for you has already occurred,” says Snape with a rare show of humour, and Percy has to smile despite himself, some of the tension leaking out of his body. When Snape offers his arm to Apparate Percy, however, all of the panic snaps back into Percy’s body, and he finds that his palms are too sweaty to grip comfortably on Snape, and he has to wipe them on his robes, which is humiliating and does nothing for his mental calm.

The meeting is held in Malfoy Manor, though Lucius, of course, is not present. Snape had informed him on the way down to the Apparation point in Hogsmeade that a Ministry squad led by Alastor Moody himself surprised Lucius on his way to Gringotts and apprehended him before the man could withdraw any money from his vault.

“It was an idiotic thing to do, going to Gringotts,” Snape had said with an elaborate eye-roll. “But then again, Lucius has always been impulsive.”

They Apparate to the gate and make the long and chilly walk up to the front door. Percy has done this walk before, of course, but always in the warmth of the day, and always at the invitation of Narcissa. At night, the peacocks’ screeches are frightening rather than humorous, and the large fir trees to either side seem to whisper softly of dangerous secrets hidden within their thick coat. Percy gulps and pulls his cloak around him tighter.

“Remember,” Snape says, right before they walk in. “You have a right to be here. This is what we have been working toward.”

To an eavesdropper, this would sound like Snape reassuring his mentee, but to Percy, it is a reminder of what they still have ahead of them. He nods grimly, readjusts his mental wards, and follows Snape inside.

As Snape leads him nimbly to a ballroom that Percy has never entered, a change comes over the man. He walks straighter, more powerfully, his stride altering until his robes billow around him with purpose. It is a version of the walk Percy has seen him employ to great effect at Hogwarts, but infinitely more sophisticated. When Percy glances at Snape’s face right before they enter, he is taken aback by the cool, mocking smirk that lingers around the sides of Snape’s lips, the way his face is suddenly hard and threatening, his dark eyes inscrutable. But he is no bat of the dungeons, with greasy hair and an unpleasant smile; this darkly amused expression looks less like he wants to give somebody detention and more like he knows he could dismember an enemy six separate ways, and he just might if someone dared question him.

Only now does Percy realise how much Snape relaxes in his presence, at least visibly. It frightens him, but it also relieves him to know that Snape is, at least nominally, on his side.

As they stride through the halls, Percy can feel the Dark Lord’s magic twisting around him, like an oily tentacle examining him with interest. ***Percy...*** he hears echo through his head, Tom’s voice somewhere in between its normal silky tones and the Dark Lord’s high tenor. ***Welcome, Percy…***

When Snape strides into the large ballroom where the Dark Lord is waiting, Percy tagging at his heels, he somehow manages to convey respect but not subservience. The bow Snape directs toward the Dark Lord is elegant but not obsequious. Percy, sweating despite himself, performs the bow he had practised, and hopes for the best. His mind is clear—so clear that his anxiety merely floats like mist on the outside of his shields, unable to penetrate his mind and take root.

About thirty Death Eaters are spread throughout the room, talking in small groups. Still in a bow, Percy takes in the Dark Lord's snake, coiled affectionately at his feet.

He does not feel the Dark Lord's presence heavily in his mind but he has no doubt it is there, rifling through his thoughts, assessing his shield like Dumbledore had a few hours prior.

"We have a lion in our midst," the Dark Lord says, pitching his raspy voice so that all of the conversation stops immediately. "Percival Weasley-Prewett."

Percy doesn't say anything. Babbling, Snape had impressed upon him, would be nothing short of foolish.

"Tell me, Percival. How is it that a Weasley son came to win the support of the Slytherin Head of House? I hear your brothers are less...deserving of notice."

"I assure you it was not my skill with potions," Percy responds with wit bourne out of a desperation to keep the conversation about his family from becoming deserving of notice. In the odd, absent way that his brain seems to be processing this evening, he realises that Voldemort smells of blood.

"Nor your name and fortune, either," Voldemort says, amused. "Well, Severus? What proof do you have that Percival is no spy for Dumbledore?"

Severus inclines his head. “The boy has been practising Dark magic since his fourth year, my Lord. Even if he wished, Dumbledore would not trust him.”

"I would *never* trust Dumbledore," Percy says, entirely truthfully, filling his voice with as much hatred as he can. "Dumbledore has spent far too long running amok in the Ministry, exerting control over Hogwarts, playing the game without an opponent."

“You wish to be his opponent?”

“I hope you will, my Lord,” he says boldly.

The Dark Lord chuckles, an oily, slick sound, and without hesitation he enters Percy’s mind fully.

Percy drops to his knees from the impact of it. When Snape enters his mind it feels like mist, stretching its sly fingers to all crevices, embedding itself fully in his consciousness, impossible to fool. When Tom possesses him, it feels like a presence, solid, as if his mind were truly linked with Percy's. Dumbledore feels like the lightest of fingers, a soft breeze fluttering against his shields, something entirely too easy to overlook.

But the Dark Lord feels like flames, spreading and consuming all that stands before it. He takes memories viciously: Dumbledore asking Percy to spy on his brother, the instant surge of anger that Percy felt that he was not worthy of attention himself; a basilisk, rearing its head, Percy reaching out with trembling fingers; Fiendyre twisting from Percy's wand, only to be consumed by a savage slash of McGonagall's wand; sixteen year old Tom flickering out in front of his eyes as a phoenix lets loose a glistening tear; Percy, killing mice, on his knees as he vomits from the disgust, his shaky realisation that he does not like pain; Percy watching Severus Snape cast *Imperio* on his pet rat, a glimmer of awe underneath his shock; and his decision to come here, a memory they had staged yesterday, Snape telling him that to swear service is no easy task, Percy telling him firmly that he will pay the price if it allows him to command the respect he knows that he deserves.

So many memories, so many real, so many unwittingly exposing Percy to what he truly is: an arrogant boy, a vain boy, a lost boy, trying desperately to achieve a goal he does not fully understand, angry and stifled but still convinced his true potential has not yet been reached.

Percy had protested, at first, when Snape suggested he leave those memories unguarded. But seeing them now through the shared lens of their vision, he understands why it is so entirely plausible that he joined the Dark Lord. In another world, he very well might have.

The Dark Lord's exit from his mind is jarring. Percy collapses, panting, on the stone in front of Voldemort.

Voldemort's high pitched laughter rings out, and cautiously, the other Death Eaters join in.

"You had the pleasure of my earlier acquaintance," Voldemort says. "I wonder why you did not earlier say hello."

Percy ducks his head instinctively, pressing his forehead to the cool floor. “I failed you, my Lord,” he whispers, his body tensing. “I lost the diary.”

“Dumbledore has it now?” The Dark Lord asks lightly, dangerously.

“Not to my knowledge, my Lord,” Percy whispers, head still bowed. “I would think it could lie in the Chamber still. With your permission, I would look for it, and bring it to you.”

“It is brave of you to admit this,” Voldemort comments, as if amused. “I see the appeal of you Gryffindors. Perhaps we should...recruit more widely.”

The Death Eaters titter on command.

“I believe the boy can help us,” Snape says from beside Percy. “There are many of his age who are dissatisfied with Dumbledore and have nowhere to turn. It will be a true blow to Dumbledore to have his former students turned against him.”

Percy flinches as Voldemort stands. From his vantage point on the floor, he can only see the dark leather boots that he is wearing. “Until he goes crawling back to Dumbledore, of course,” says the Dark Lord. “Will you do that, Percival? Will you betray us?”

“Never,” Percy whispers. A second later he is screaming.

The Cruciatus is like nothing he’s ever felt. Time is slowed and compressed, the pain simultaneously invading every droplet of blood inside his body and cutting lacerations into his skin, his mind clouded with the fog of unrelenting horror…

...and then it ends, and Percy realises belatedly that he’s on his back, and his throat is raw from screaming, and his head is throbbing from where he banged it repeatedly on the floor in his convulsions.

Voldemort laughs, a high-pitched sound that is nothing like Tom’s dry chuckle. “You are so desperate to be worthy,” he croons softly, and he sounds suddenly, shockingly like Tom. “Poor little Weasley, so overlooked. It was impressive to ferret out the truth of Barty—I admit to being somewhat surprised. But it will take more than that, Percival, to be worthy of joining my ranks.”

Percy recognizes the cue and pushes himself to his feet, though every limb is trembling. “I am close to the Minister,” he says, clearing his throat. “I am positioned well in the Ministry, and my siblings still trust me. I can bring you information.”

“So you shall,” Voldemort says. “Severus, I task you to take charge of him. You may dispose of him if he...disappoints.”

Percy gulps but stays silent. Snape inclines his head in acquiescence.

Just when Percy believes his brief interview is about to be over, Voldemort meets Percy’s eyes, and suddenly unleashes his magic so that it crashes over the entire room, suffocating and heavy. He feels like he's choking on it, like he's sliding into a liquid Devil's Snare and it's solidifying around him as he tries to escape.

Only when Voldemort seems satisfied by his show of strength does he reschackle his magic. Percy suddenly, abruptly, understands how so many powerful wizards subjugated themselves to Voldemort. If this is what his magic feels like tainted...Tom, before he returned, must have been intoxicating to be around.

“You will not betray me, little lion,” Voldemort whispers. “Or I will kill you. Do you understand?”

Percy wants to say something clever, something memorable, but he is so struck by the Dark Lord’s magic that all he can do is nod furiously and focus on staying upright.

Perhaps it had been a mistake not to run when he had the chance.

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On Monday, Percy can barely drag himself out of bed. The minute he arrives at work, his day gets even worse: Scrimgeour is seemingly waiting for him, looking through his things without any sort of shyness at the intrusion.

“Hello,” says Percy, cautiously.

Scrimgeour picks up one of his quills and squeezes it, as if to check for hidden compartments or warding. Percy wrinkles his nose at the sight; the quill had not been inexpensive. “You’re looking peaky.”

Percy smiles thinly. “Magical exhaustion.”

“Hm.” Scrimgeour eyes him. “Doing lots of magic, were you?”

Percy looks down as if embarrassed. It is not hard to feign. “I’ve been practising my defensive magic after work, sir.”

Scrimgeour grunts again and sets down the quill. “Good.”

Percy smiles tightly as he waits for Scrimgeour to reveal why he is openly picking through Percy’s things. All he knows about Scrimgeour is that he is curt, efficient, intelligent, and

ruthlessly pragmatic. None of it prevents his murder in just under a year's time. Percy has grown tired of speaking with ghosts.

“You’re Fudge’s boy,” Scrimgeour says finally, as if he hasn’t been communicating with Percy about the whereabouts of Sirius Black on Fudge’s orders for the past year.

“Junior Assistant to the Minister,” Percy corrects pointedly. “I hear rumours of a vote of no confidence.”

Scrimgeour smirks. He’s so very different from Fudge; tall and broad and clearly powerful. “Do you believe Crouch was a Death Eater this whole time? He was there that day, wearing the robes, though of course he succumbed to a heart attack shortly after. Odd, wouldn’t you say?”

“I do think it odd,” Percy admits. He lowers his voice and says, “I had my suspicions, Minister, that Crouch and Lucius were involved in Amos Diggory’s death. I spoke to Priscilla about it once, but we thought it…dangerous to openly investigate further. There was something odd about Crouch, something I should have questioned more.” He pauses and then adds, genuinely embarrassed, “I should have taken action earlier.”

“Hmm,” Scrimgeour grunts for the third time. “And you, Weasley?”

“Am I – what, sir?”

“Are you trustworthy?”

Percy blinks and then tries to meet Scrimgeour’s gaze solidly. “I believe so, sir.”

Scrimgeour looks at him steadily for another moment and then nods his head brusquely. “We need to speak with Harry Potter. It is clear that he is more important to this than we believed.”

“You believe what the papers are saying, sir? That he’s...that he’s the *Chosen One*?”

“A prophecy from the Hall of Prophecy was destroyed that night,” Scrimgeour reveals. “A prophecy with Potter’s name on it. He’s in the thick of this, and while I can understand why he may not have wanted to work with Fudge, he’ll understand he needs to work with me.”

“As Head Auror?” Percy dares.

Scrimgeour smiles. It is not pleasant. “Weasley, you know better than that.”

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The vote of no confidence is not announced that evening, but everyone in the Ministry knows it is merely a matter of time. Percy avoids Fudge, for now. He instead volunteers to clean out

Crouch's old office. A heart attack, or more likely, a curse from a Death Eater, one of the many that seem to walk the Ministry's halls freely. Percy hasn't heard any more news of Crouch, the newspapers switching instead to praising the new Auror force that Fudge has instituted. Fudge, it seems, does not want to linger on Crouch's perfidy.

Inside Crouch's office, the wardbreakers dismantle the wards on his desk. That elusive bottom drawer holds empty vials. Percy claims them quickly, letting it 'accidentally' slip that Crouch frequently took stimulants. He examines them discreetly; Polyjuice. He keeps them in case he ever needs the evidence.

The top drawer contains documents that would have been important to Crouch, Sr. His will; his vault information; his wife's death certificate; his son's. Percy bundles them up and owls them to Crouch's executor. Nothing nefarious here. Crouch's replacement is an elderly but fierce older woman named Esmeralda Vane. She informs Percy crisply she no longer needs his services, as she has a loyal assistant of her own. Percy can't say he'll be sad to see the last of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, though he does catch Liam on his way out, and finally apologise, his ears turning red, for his outburst earlier that year.

("Stress makes us all prats," says Liam magnanimously, which is a far nicer response than Percy thought he'd receive. "I live at home, and I've been snapping at my mum every time she tries to come into my room and ask me what I'd like to eat."

The odd knowledge that perhaps Percy would have liked Liam, had he tried, makes Percy reply, his voice quiet, "Look, Liam. Crouch was a Death Eater, a literal Death Eater, and he was keeping tabs on all of us. The Minister has confirmed that the Dark Lord has returned, in some form or another. You ought to leave, now, before you're forced to run. Take your mum and move yourselves out of Britain and keep your guard up, do you understand?"

Liam looks at Percy soberly, some of the boyish humour dimming from his eyes. "You really think it'll get that bad?"

"Worse than what you're imagining, I expect," Percy confirms quietly. "Don't mention to anyone what I said, or I'll be next. We only have a few months to get ourselves sorted out, and I'd hate to see you leave it too late.")

Snape comes to see him precisely one week and one day after the Attack of the Dementors, as it's coming to be called, as if judging that an acceptable time for Percy to recover from the stress. He arrives in front of Percy's door a few minutes before noon, and Percy has the rather distinct pleasure of realising that his wards are now strong enough to keep Snape out.

Percy watches him through the televisor charm for a gleeful five minutes before he opens the door himself.

"You should not open it until you've verified my identity," Snape says immediately.

Percy's smile falters. "Nobody else knows where I live."

"The Dark Lord now knows your name," Snape points out coolly. He gives a short bow to Tom, watching amusedly from his perch on the wall. "I would assume others know where

you live. For that reason we are speaking somewhere else."

Before Percy can react, Snape grabs his arm roughly and Apparates him away. Percy stumbles when they arrive a split second later on the side of a riverbank, somewhere entirely alien to Percy, though he can tell at a glance that they are near a Muggle town. Probably down the road from Snape's house, if he had to guess.

"Where are we?"

"Pitiable, Weasley," Snape drawls. "This is the second time I have penetrated your defences with the same strategy. I didn't take you for the type that needs to be taught the same lesson twice."

"How do you prevent yourself from being Apparated?" Percy snaps back, looking around him in interest. Downstream he can just about make out a few large, ugly Muggle buildings, spewing toxic smoke into the sky. Percy sniffs carefully but the air here seems to smell clean; he casts a few air purifying charms for good measure.

"You do not allow yourself to be grabbed."

Perhaps a small, localised anti-Apparation charm. Maybe linked to a trinket? Percy is experimenting at home with Portkeys; he's already created Portkeys on the buttons of each of his robes, linked to various places. He chose Shell Cottage as his safe house, if only because it in theory now belongs to him. Perhaps he can do a similar thing with an Apparation ward?

"Your cover, if you may call it that, is tenuously safe," Snape says without preamble. "The Dark Lord believes you are not a spy for Dumbledore, but he does not think very much of your mettle. In short, you will have to think of something impressive to convince him you are not likely to run off to your little family at the first sight of blood. I told him I will present you at the beginning of autumn."

"For another interview?"

"To be Marked, or killed. Whichever he is in the mood for, depending on how impressive your display is."

Percy blanches and kicks a stone into the oily water of the river. He knows, of course, that he will likely have to be Marked…but he hadn't thought it would happen quite so soon. To get the Mark would be to enter himself into the Dark Lord's service. If anyone were to see it on his arm, likely they'd kill him first and ask questions later. He'd have no hope of ever convincing his family that he was trustworthy, at least not while the Dark Lord still lives. "What have you told Dumbledore about me?"

"Not much." Snape sounds faintly surprised. "I told you that I would go with you to speak to him chose to interview with the Dark Lord. So you have, and so I did."

"But he said you spoke of me. Positively spoke of me."

To Percy’s utter surprise, instead of answering immediately, Snape levitates a stone into his hand with a flick of his wand and then throws it into the river, an utterly uncharacteristic gesture for him. Percy fights, and mainly conquers, the urge to gape. "I did wish for him to trust you."

“I don’t think he does,” Percy admits. “He didn’t seem pleased that I would be in the Order.”

“Albus always believes the worst of people, though he claims he believes the best,” says Snape, his voice bitter and dry. “Do not let it affect you.”

Percy gives Snape a sideways glance. "I think you secretly do think positively of me."

"Hardly," Snape sniffs. He throws another stone into the river. A wordless spell picks it up and takes it skimmingly to the other side.

"It's alright, I won't tell anyone," Percy says peaceably. He could not express precisely what, but something in his chest has been assuaged, at least temporarily, and he feels an emotion oddly like fondness for the taciturn man standing beside him. "But I think I will start calling you Severus."

"You only call me Severus when you want something from me."

"I do want something from you." Percy sits on the riverbank after casting a protective spell on his robes. "You're the only one I can trust absolutely, Severus. Except for Myrtle, I suppose."

"You want someone to listen to your insipid problems?"

"I suppose I just want to know that there is someone I can trust."

Snape throws another stone into the river and then gives a twin sigh to Percy's and sits delicately next to him. "I grew up here, you know," he says, looking intentionally away from Percy. "With—with her."

Percy and Snape do not speak of Lily. Have not spoken, save for the few dreadful times the diadem conjured up Lily's ghostly form. But Snape knows that Percy knows, that the whole world knows of the story of Lily and Severus, ill-fated friends and possible lovers.

"It's nice."

Snape snorts. "The river is the only nice part of this town."

"You grew up poor, didn't you?" Percy feels Snape bristle and hastens to explain. "I can tell. You forget that I grew up poor, too—twice."

"You grew up Wizarding poor," Snape corrects nastily. "Wizarding poor means you can mend clothing or finish chores with a flick of your wand. It means you can preserve old food or coax additional yield out of your garden. It means you will be warm and well and hardly ever sick, even if you cannot afford heated blankets or electricity or medicine."

Percy had known Snape is a half-blood, but he had not known he had grown up as a Muggle. Although he'd said, just the other day, that his father had been a Muggle, and he'd gone to school with them for many years. Percy can't help but wonder if Snape had used to think of Muggles as animals too, or whether he'd thought all along they were the same as wizards and chose to follow the Dark Lord nevertheless. *My father was the worst Muggle I'd known, and her parents were some of the best.* Perhaps it took him the last decade to balance those two ideas against each other.

"Do you truly think I should run and hide?"

Percy can feel the weight of Snape's gaze, even as he continues to look out over the river. "I would not blame you if you did."

"But."

"It is not easy to face the Dark Lord. You must be better at shielding your thoughts than you are at thinking them. You did well, hiding your mind, but that was with an entire day of preparation. It must become instinctive to you, so that you never falter, even if taken by surprise. You will be asked to do things—kill, perhaps, or stand idly by."

Well Percy has already done both of these things and survived. "It is shameful that I would be willing to join without the Mark?"

Once he's Marked it never leaves, does not fade even after the Dark Lord is defeated again. Percy cannot imagine walking through life with that stain on his arm. It feels so unfair, particularly if they manage to defeat Voldemort within a few years.

"I have had the Mark for most of my life," Severus says quietly. "I understand."

They sit in strangely companionable silence. If Percy does not look too far to the left or the right, he can pretend that this part of the river is pleasant, or at least more familiar to him than the rest of the Muggle town.

"How are you?" Percy says into the quiet. "I cannot even imagine the burden you are facing." Snape does not even have a family, friends. Trusted by nobody, used by everybody. Percy thinks of the loneliness of the last year and shudders.

"You may be the first person to ask me that in twenty years," Severus says with a rusty chuckle.

Percy looks at him sideways. "Well, I mean it."

The older man sighs, his long and slender fingers toying with the grass beneath his robes. "I am tired," he admits. "The Dark Lord grows stronger every day, not to mention erratic. This defeat angered him greatly. Albus refuses to tell me what he is doing, but I believe he is trying to find the Horcruxes."

"He didn't tell you about them?"

Severus quirks his lips. "Albus trusts nobody save for himself. He will tell me of the Horcruxes only when it becomes necessary."

"What do you think he will do if he goes looking for them and finds them missing?"

"I have thought of that," Severus allows. "I believe he will not think another destroyed the Horcrux. I think he will merely look elsewhere. Albus is as vain as Tom, when it comes down to it."

"Severus...I was thinking, and with Bellatrix's death, her vault deed will pass to Narcissa Malfoy," Percy says carefully. "If we could speak to her, I may be able to convince her to let us into her vault."

"You truly think he left a Horcrux with Bellatrix? You think he would not try and move it?"

"Tom never got a Gringotts vault," Percy replies thoughtfully. "He resented that, you know. I think he would keep one there, and the Black vault is the most ancient one he has access to. I checked the other Death Eaters. None of them, even the Malfoys, have a lineage as pure as the Black's."

"We will not be able to speak to Narcissa easily," Severus says with a sigh. "But I will watch her."

"I don't know how you make enough time in the day for everything."

Severus snorts. "I tend not to sleep very much," he admits. "But Albus has relieved me of the burden of tutoring Potter in the fine arts of the mind. He has the power of *love*, apparently, and no longer needs to protect his mind with such an insubstantial art like Occlumency."

Percy raises an eyebrow. The power of *love*. Likely Harry has some other skill or power that Dumbledore is guarding closely as a secret. "Good to know."

"And you? Are you ready for this next year?"

"Are you?" Percy counters obstinately, before he lets out a long exhale. "Truthfully, I'd hoped we would finish our task before this year occurred."

"As did I," admits Severus. "But we are not yet defeated."

"No," says Percy, and for a very long time they sit there together, staring out over the river as it meanders slowly down the bank.

DECEPTION (1/4)

Chapter Notes

> You know how in horror movies the first half of the movie is always fairly normal and interesting, and then all of a sudden everything just deteriorates and starts becoming a bit wild?
>
> Ahem. Voldemort is back, and Percy is not going to have an easy time with it.

CHAPTER TEN: DECEPTION

1996 — 1997 (Percy is 20 & 33, Severus is 35, Harry is 16, and Dumbledore has one year left to live)

July 1996

The Dark Lord and his followers sweep into July like a three headed Cerberus let off a leash.

Percy sleeps at the Ministry for three straight days—and he is not the only one transfiguring a desk into a bed, as the Death Eaters unleash a stream of Muggle baiting at a level previously unseen. Even Percy cannot muster up the energy to treat his father frostily when an entire day is spent dismantling curses on toasters and telephones, curses aimed to maim and torture rather than merely confuse or confound.

The Ministry's lack of success with the giants bites them in the third week of July when devastation rages through the Muggle town of Somerset. Percy arrives on the scene with a medley of other employees—the distinction between the different Ministry divisions all but eradicated in the face of overwhelming need—and has to hold on to a blackened tree stump for support as he surveys the destruction wrought by angry giants. The entire town looks to be flattened, roofs ripped off houses, bodies littering the street in the imprints of massive footprints, trees still smoking gently. *HURRICANES ERUPT*, trumpet the Muggle newspapers, though the Daily Prophet soberly reports otherwise.

Amelia Bones is killed the following week. There is no time for any sort of funeral; three other prominent Ministry heads are targeted within days, though they luckily are able to escape with their lives when they hear the first pops of Apparation. The evening after he learns of Bones' death, Percy agonises about sending Bill a note to enchant the Burrow, but he cannot risk it, not now. Yaxley is at the Ministry, and if he is not yet a Death Eater, he will be soon. He watches Percy carefully, and so Percy does absolutely nothing, a perfect little Ministry employee.

But the worst incident, by far, is that of the Brockdale Bridge.

On a relatively calm summer day, the bridge unexpectedly begins to sway, sending a loud, creaking tone through the still air, a sound that haunts the nightmares of more than one Muggle in the weeks after. With a loud, abrupt crack—and a whispered spell by a Death Eater, lingering inconspicuously by the exit—the bridge snaps cleanly in half, sending two dozen cars tumbling into the icy river and causing massive accidents on both sides. That would in itself be horrible, of course, but what makes it truly terrible is that Percy learns the following day that Fudge had known it would happen and had consented to the bridge's destruction.

"What would you have had me do?" Fudge shouts hoarsely at Scrimgeour. The door is open, and dozens of sombre Ministry employees watch the proceedings silently.

Scrimgeour turns on Fudge, the anger in his broad frame visible even from the sliver that Percy can make out from his vantage point, keeping a low profile as the two men he works most closely with in the Ministry tear at each other. Percy remembers the bridge's destruction from the first timeline, but he'd had no idea it was a planned attack, and one the Ministry could have prevented, or one that would happen again in this timeline. What drives those awful things from happening, given what he has changed, and what he has not? "We do not take ultimatums, Fudge! That was blackmail, pure and simple!"

"He threatened mass murder if we do not stand by! It said so, right in the note!"

"That *was* mass murder! Over thirty Muggles died! And you told nobody!"

"What would you have done?"

"We could have warned the Muggle Prime Minister! We could have filled those cars with corpses! We could have been at the scene to try and apprehend those responsible!"

Fudge notices his audience and swells, his face purpling in rage. The door slams, but the vote of no confidence that is introduced that very night surprises no one.

(Percy, avoiding the harsh glare of the other Ministry workers who assume he must have known about the blackmail note, thinks bitterly that maybe he will sacrifice Fudge in order to get into Voldemort's good graces).

Muggles Imperioused to torture their family members; half the shops in Diagon Alley closed; the lists of the missing growing by every day. It had been this bad before—but Percy had thought they would finish their task before it got this bad again. One small bright spot is that Liam takes his advice and disappears without so much of a note, and two other Muggleborn clerks take his example and follow suit. Percy does not know where they disappear to, but he hopes they are clever enough to cover their traces.

(Tom, eyes alight, enjoys hearing the tales of destruction. He asks Percy for every detail, and Percy even takes to enchanting the *Prophet* to hang in front of Tom's portrait and read itself aloud. The monotonous sound of the horrid news rolling in, day after day, permeates every second of his day, from worried chatter between people waiting in line, to muttered

comments from cynical employees, to the clamour of people trying to get a word in with Fudge, who takes to hiding in his office, the curtains drawn).

Percy does manage to accomplish something, somehow, in the midst of the July turmoil. With Tom's help he manages to finish enchanting a small diary, more of a notebook, according to Tom, to send to Snape. To *Severus*, he reminds himself firmly. In theory he'd like to make a set of such books and distribute them to the people he would like to contact—McGonagall, Cedric, Tonks, Charlie—but the magic was surprisingly difficult and takes him nearly an entire weekend to complete, so he'll need to find time away from Tom's prying eyes to finish the others. Not to mention the successful linkage of the notebooks necessitates the recipient imbuing the pages with a potion made of their blood, which he suspects would not go over particularly well with some of the other people he would like to contact.

Hi, this is Percy.

I examined this carefully. It is something approaching Dark magic.

It is not, Percy writes back. *Blood magic is not necessarily Dark magic.*

Have you not read Behdelli?

I have. His points are fundamentally flawed—he describes Dark magic as anything that uses power other than pure magic. By that logic the entire disciple of Potions is Dark magic.

Isn't it?

Percy huffs out a laugh. Severus' handwriting is cramped and spiky, nothing like the smooth and even script of Tom. He'd worried that writing in the notebook would be difficult, but his charms seem to be working perfectly.

"It works, then?" Tom asks.

Percy nods. "Perfectly."

"What next, then?" The portrait asks, stretching like a cat.

Percy thinks about it. "I've been meaning for a while to think about how to *strategically* find the Horcruxes," he says, as if the idea had casually crossed his mind, rather than being his sole focus for the last few years. "Soul magic has rules, as nebulous as they may be. Consider when we swear a vow; *something* is evaluating what we mean to be true. Consider when a Dementor kisses us. *Something* is lost forever. Or in the Fidelius. I could go on. We are not having much luck finding the Horcrux at the orphanage, and I hate that you are bound in the portrait, unable to escape."

Tom nods. "The soul can be forced to take tangible form," he agrees without stating the obvious. "But it cannot be scryed."

"No," Percy concedes. "But I'm not convinced of that entirely. I mean, I can do a *Point Me* on anyone that isn't in an Unplottable location—and if I am in the same location as them, then the *Point Me* works again. I can summon a human body, or banish them. Magic can be

entirely literal, sometimes. Perhaps when I say *Point Me Tom Riddle's Horcrux* the problem is that I am not specifying clearly what I mean."

Tom considers this thoughtfully. "When you're under a Vow you do not know objective truth," he points out. "Whatever magic that evaluates your answer does not give you knowledge you do not have. You could not force someone to take Veritaserum and ask them to reveal another's secrets, only what they already know to be true."

Percy nods. What is really driving him, though of course he shan't say, is not the urgency to find the Horcruxes that already exist. Dumbledore presumably equips Harry with the knowledge to find these, and Percy is close, he can feel it.

What worries him are the set of Horcruxes that Voldemort could hypothetically make at any time. For all they know, that's what has kept Voldemort quiet the last year, figuring out how to split his soul again and again and again without going mad. What if there are now thirteen Horcruxes, or seventeen, or twenty seven? What if there are dozens and dozens? "I'm going to look into Dementors," he says airily, casually, as if on a whim. "And the Fidelius. We know Dementors can extract a soul, and the Fidelius can shield a secret within."

"What would happen if a Secret Keeper was Kissed?"

Tom and Percy share a look. Percy does not have to say what they both know: they are itching to find someone and experiment.

***

Umbridge is summarily dismissed. She is not penalised, nor sent to Azkaban; she merely disappears one day, and Fudge sends Dawlish to Hogwarts instead to oversee the rest of term. Dumbledore returns to the public at the very last, though Percy knows from his own experience that the Headmaster took over his office within hours of battling the Dark Lord; Dawlish reports that Dumbledore appeared like magic at the Leaving Feast to general clamour and admiration. Percy rolls his eyes.

"We can't alienate Dumbledore," Fudge mutters to himself at the news. "He's too beloved. But he's *got* to see reason. If he knew You Know Who was back, why didn't he say anything? We were supposed to just take the word of Harry Potter? And what about Dumbledore's Army?"

Percy does not say anything. Fudge has days left, by his count, and he hardly is going to implicate himself by agreeing to anything Fudge says. Percy had been planning on speaking to Umbridge to figure out how she'd controlled the Dementors, but he's not going to go after her now. He'll have to try something else, though he isn't quite sure how to *approach* a Dementor, save for visiting Azkaban, and Percy does not have the slightest bit of interest in attempting that manoeuvre.

The very first weekend that Severus can get away, he and Percy go to visit the caves. Percy has been working on his Transfiguration, and he takes a small boat out of his pockets and resizes it triumphantly. It is a simple rowboat, the simplest schema he could find in a book, transfigured out of a large oak branch he had felled in the fields behind the Burrow, furtively obtained in the middle of the night. These types of single Transfigurations are difficult: Percy, though by no means an expert boat-maker, had to keep the intricate details of the model as tightly fixed in his mind as he could while willing the branch to take shape all at once. The easier approach, magic-wise, would have been to transfigure multiple branches into the requisite parts, but then Percy would have had to build an actual boat, and he is far better at magic than he is manual labour.

Severus makes no comment, which Percy takes to be positive.

They lower themselves precariously into the boat and speed across the choppy waves. Percy focuses on stabilising the boat, and Severus steers with a steady spell from his wand. Despite Percy's excellent spellwork, the boat slams into an invisible barrier a few metres from the cliffs, pitching them both into the icy waves.

Spluttering, Percy kicks his way to the surface, his robes heavily drenched with water but too valuable to kick off into the sea. Severus recovers first and makes his way to the cliff with steady, even strokes. Percy, who can swim but not well, paddles after him as quickly as he can.

They tread water at the cliff's base.

"There," Severus shouts over the rage and crash of the waves, pointing with a long finger toward the tiniest of fissures in the dark and forbidding rock. Percy would not have believed him save for the way the fissure glows when he casts one of his detection spells. There is magic, there, magic that Percy can feel when he centres himself and sends small tendrils of his magic out to investigate.

The waves are rough and choppy, and it takes Percy three tries to haul himself into the small passage, shivering, his fingers cold around his wand, his teeth chattering too much to cast a proper warming spell. His leg is bleeding from where he’d nicked himself trying to climb to the top, which seems like an inauspicious way to begin their adventure.

Severus points his wand at Percy, and a second later Percy feels the chill begin to fade. Steam rises from his robes. His shivers cease. Another spell and the wound on Percy’s leg closes with a sting.

"Thanks." Percy flushes; he should have thought of the nonverbal spell if he couldn't speak.

Severus nods brusquely and strides ahead. The fissure leads into a small, rocky passage; they have to stoop to avoid hitting their heads. As they'd discussed, Percy keeps up an intricate protection ward, while Snape, more familiar with the feel of Voldemort's magic, searches for their next step.

"Here," Snape says abruptly. It could be nowhere else; the passage ends at a wall of solid rock. Percy keeps his protection spell steady while Severus inspects the wall with his fingers

and his wand, even placing his ear to it at one point and listening intently. "There's definitely a ward on it. Switch."

They switch positions and tasks. Percy examines the stone himself, noting the nearly silent thrum of magic, the way the air feels moist and oppressive, how the hairs on his neck prickle with unease. Definitely a ward, one balancing the competing demands of efficacy and subtlety. The magic feels oily and dark, grimly forbidding.

He casts the spell that he'd learned to strip the diadem into its component parts. Severus leans forward and they both examine the glowing lights in silence.

"We must pay a price," Percy says finally. He recognizes this kind of magic. It is like Legilimency; to penetrate the mind, the mind must be something that can be penetrated. Part of the magic of Legilimency is forcing the mind to materialise as something tangible, even arguably physical. This type of ward is the same. In order to defeat it, it must first be something that can be touched, whether by blood or magic or merely a finger, and the one trying to defeat it must provide the transformative force to allow it to take a form.

Severus examines it himself. "I'll do it. Since I am Marked it is less likely to recognize me as *me*. Perhaps it will even think I am *Him.*"

Severus pricks his finger with his wand and smears it against the stone. There's a hiss—but nothing happens. They exchange silent looks. Severus pulls a knife from his robes and makes a small gash in all five of the fingers on his left hand. This time the blood sacrifice is accepted; the magic sparks and hisses and then a silver arch appears, etched into the stone. Percy barely has time to notice the intricate runes curling across the top before the thick stone melts away as if it were mere illusion.

"Follow three steps behind."

Percy steps aside to let Severus take the lead. Pulling his magic around him like a cloak, he brings up again the complex layered wand he'd spent the last week learning how to construct, tying it to the small wardstones they both carry deep in the pockets of their robes. It's a trick Percy had thought of during a conversation with Tom, and it makes it easier to anchor the ward to their bodies, thus reducing the size and therefore energy necessary to protect them.

They step inside and are greeted with an unsettling, eerie sight. The cave—cavern, more accurately—is massive, the walls made of the same glistening dark stone as the outside passage. They are on the banks of a pitch black lake, the water entirely still, stretching so far into the distance that Percy can hardly see the other end. There is so much magic in the air that Percy's chest is tight. Old magic, ancient magic. Magic that sets Percy’s teeth on edge.

"Do you think Tom made this place?" Percy whispers into the silence. The majesty of the cavern bears a striking contrast to the Room of Requirement, or Malfoy Manor, or even a Gringotts vault. Whatever is protected here is protected very carefully against not just destruction but also *detection.*

Severus frowns, his wand a blur as he casts several quick spells, speaking in a strange tongue. "No," he says finally. "I think this is elemental magic. Old magic. Can you hear it?"

Severus casts a silver spell that Percy does not know, and suddenly the buzz that has been in the back of his mind since they were tipped into the water is amplified until Percy can hear a low, steady drone.

"I am not very familiar with this type of magic," Severus admits uneasily.

"Neither am I." Percy had studied elemental magic during his time with McGonagall, but only in theory, and only because he had found it interesting. "You think Tom found the cave. He didn’t make it."

No wonder whatever he had done here had scarred Dennis Bishop for the rest of his life. Percy feels so unsettled with that constant, endless hum, almost like the rhythmic chanting of an endless spell, that he longs to cast a silencing charm to block it out.

"I can sense his magic here," Severus continues in a low, thoughtful tone. "Can you?"

Percy reaches out with his magic to feel for the sticky, oily feel of the Dark Lord's magic, but he cannot sense it. Below the drone of the elemental magic he feels only sharp, bright magic that tastes to him like a crystal stone buried beneath pure, frozen snow.

Tom. It's Tom's magic here, he realises suddenly. This sharply clean feeling had underpinned the entire diary, and even the twisting dense smoke of the diadem. Tom's magic feels like ice, but it had been so subtle with the earlier Horcruxes that Percy hadn’t realised its insidious influence.

"He's sick," Percy breathes in realisation. "The Dark Lord."

Severus gives him a glance. "Yes. His magic has been corrupted, perhaps unalterably. I suspect the ritual he used went somehow wrong. I have been studying it. I do not know what could have caused it to fail; Potter is his enemy, Pettigrew is his servant, and the bone was from his father."

"Maybe Pettigrew is not a faithful servant," Percy suggests. "Or Harry is not his enemy."

He will have to puzzle it over later, but it at least explains why every time Percy feels Voldemort's magic he wants to cringe away from it.

"I believe his Horcrux is there," Severus says, slashing his wand so that a ball of light soars over the lake and hovers at the far end, where an eerily green mist twists lazily in the air. "That is where Tom's magic is concentrated."

It is an insurmountable distance, and while Percy did prepare two boats, the second will be needed to return them to shore. Percy does not like the look of that water; doubtlessly were they to touch it, some nasty curse would activate and seek to entrap or endanger them.

"Tom would need some way to get there," Percy mutters to himself as he looks around the cave. "Clearly we should not touch the water. Can we fly?"

"We do not have broomsticks," Severus says dryly.

"We cannot fly, we cannot swim. There must be a bridge, hidden, or a boat. Unless the water does not respond to Tom."

Severus shakes his head. "I do not believe Tom created this water. Let us search for his magic."

They fan out, walking quietly along the lake's edge. Percy stays as far away as he can from the obsidian water that stays so unnaturally still, searching instead for traces of Tom's frozen magic.

How would you have crossed? Percy asks Tom inside his head.

He does not think Tom would have created a bridge. He would have made something small and subtle, something only he would know to access. Something solemn, something ornamental, something befitting the majesty of this place.

Percy's next revealing charm dissolves the magic around a large green chain, coiled around a pole like Nagini's skin.

He calls Severus, who strides quickly over to examine it.

"Shield me," Severus orders. Percy raises the ward again, hoping he will not have to use the Rejuvenation Draught he brought this early in their quest, and Severus taps the chain three times with his wand.

For a long second, there is silence. Then with a tremendous screech, the chain begins to wind itself around the pole, metre after metre of wet, slimy metal emerging improbably from the lake. There's a splash, and a small boat materialises, making its slow, steady way toward the shore.

The boat is very small, and shaped vaguely familiarly to Percy. It does not look like a normal wooden boat, but rather is thin and pointed, almost ceremonial. The bow has a thin pole that ends in a carved lantern covered in intricate runes. In fact, it looks like—

"A funeral boat," Percy says in surprise. It looks like the boats that purebloods use during the funeral ceremony, where a body is cremated and the ashes pushed out to sea, to return its magic back into the elemental forces that created it.

"Tom *would* think that was funny," Severus mutters, casting a diagnostic spell on the boat as it bumps into shore. Percy nods in agreement, hearing the shadow of Tom’s laugh float through the back of his mind. "It looks relatively benign, but I think it will take only one of us."

"One adult wizard?" Percy queries. "What if I were an Animagus?"

Severus casts a complex spell on the hull of the boat and hums thoughtfully at whatever insight it gives him. "Perhaps," he says slowly. “Animagus magic does confuse many such spells.”

"Well, it is worth a try; I don't think we should take turns."

"You could wait here," Severus suggests, though without much conviction. It is hard to say whether it would be a mercy for one of them to wait behind, or consequently to force someone to go ahead alone.

Percy does not honour the suggestion with a response. He transforms into the lynx and trots up to the boat, sniffing it carefully. His lynx nose reveals no secrets that his wand could not find. Looking back at Snape, who trains his wand on Percy's form, hopefully ready to summon him back if it becomes necessary, Percy leaps neatly into the boat.

He winces, his nose to the ground, his body tense, but the boat does not move.

A second later, Snape steps delicately inside. Percy senses his body also tense, but the boat merely begins to move, slowly, automatically, making its steady way across the glassy lake. The lake smells heavily of a strange, sulphuric essence.

"Inferi," Severus says quietly. Percy whines in dismay. Tom may not have created the cave or even the lake, but he doubtlessly was responsible for populating the bodies inside. ***There are so many people that it would be a mercy to kill,*** Tom whispers in Percy's memory, and Percy whines quietly. "We're getting closer to the centre."

Percy can see the mist gathering above them and hear the soft splash as the boat cuts neatly through the water. He peers carefully over the edge, and deep inside the water he sees flashes of milky white skin.

The boat docks automatically at what seems to be a small island. Severus motions for Percy to jump out first and then follows closely behind.

"Clever, to think of the Animagus," Severus says grudgingly.

"I am always clever," sniffs Percy, back in human form. The island is small and smooth, with just enough room for them both to stand. The mist that swirls above them is green, and as they both peer closely at the low-hanging clouds, they realise the green light is emanating from a bowl, mounted on a white stone column. Without speaking, they advance together to the column.

Inside the bowl lies a glowing green potion, emitting the eerie light that reflects off the mist above. By mutual agreement Snape conjures a vial and levitates it above the brew, directing it gently to dip and scoop some of the liquid. He examines the vial closely, holding it up against a Lumos, and even carefully sniffing at the top of the glass.

"I am not familiar with this potion," Severus says slowly. "It has a base of dragon tears and nettle...I believe the viscosity may be due to thestral blood...everlasting beetles…note the mist emanating from the basin..." he trails off, continuing to examine the potion closely.

Percy begins casting diagnostic spells at the basin itself. Tom's magic is clearly concentrated here; he has no doubt the Horcrux, whatever it may be, is somewhere on the small island. But is the potion merely a misdirect?

The column underneath the basin is clearly solid stone. Percy cannot detect any concealed objects within. There is definitely a mass inside the basin, something small and indistinct. The rest of the island—he crouches, spreading a mesh of spells over the surface—appears to be nothing more than rock.

Standing, he looks at the basin itself. He conjures a much larger vessel and points his wand at the potion, syphoning it inside. It flows obediently into the bottle, but the level inside the basin does not change, as anticipated.

He cannot evaporate it, or change it to solid ice. The basin itself proves to be impervious to charms and Transfiguration. Perhaps with time Percy could separate it from the column, float it back over the lake, and research the potion, but they do not really have the hours or even days that such an operation may take. The Dark Lord could sense them at any time.

"I believe it must be drunk," Severus says finally, reluctantly speaking what they have both begun to suspect. "I believe it will weaken but not kill."

Percy nods thoughtfully. "Tom would not want only a body. He would want to question whoever made it this far."

"But Tom would have to access the Horcrux too," Snape continues musingly. "It is likely a potion with a relatively simple antidote, one that would take only minutes or hours to prepare, so that he need not plan months in advance if he wished to retrieve the Horcrux."

"Do you think we should drink it?"

"I think *you* should drink it."

For a second, Percy states, nonplussed, at Snape, feeling a stab of betrayal.

Then he shakes his head. Of course he should be the one to drink it. Severus may be able to save him or brew the antidote. Severus also has the Dark Mark, which very well could have been essential to entering the cave without alerting Tom. In theory, Percy could transform back into the lynx even if he were in pain while Snape managed their return trip home.

"Before I drink it, let's think logically," Percy says nervously. "I couldn't summon the Horcrux, nor reach it with my bare hands. The potion cannot be transferred to another vessel, evaporated, or Transfigured. We couldn't remove the basin to transport back with us."

"You have a Rejuvenation Draught on hand, yes?" Severus says, extending a slim hand. Percy fumbles in his robes and hands over the small vial, glinting eerily in the misty green light. "I also have blood replenishing potions, a nourishment potion, and Dreamless Sleep, as well as a bezoar."

Percy nods nervously. "If I am to be incapacitated and unable to transform?"

Severus' face is grim, but at that last question he smirks, suddenly looking rather pleased with himself. "I can fly," he reveals improbably. "I examined the air as we traversed the lake by boat. I believe if I do not touch the water I will be able to fly back."

"You—you can fly?" Percy gapes at Severus. Flying, truly flying, is thought to be an impossible skill. "Can you teach me?"

"I was taught by the Dark Lord himself," Severus says, his eyes shuttered as he recalls some long ago event. "If we succeed in our mission to bring down the Dark Lord, and we're both alive, I will teach you. Now. The potion. You may have to drink it all. I will force you if necessary."

Percy nods. "We should have brought a spare," he jokes weakly.

Severus smirks again. "We will next time."

"Severus, if you have to force me…" Percy swallows roughly. "Can you use the Imperius?"

Severus nods, his expression carefully blank. Percy swallows again and turns to the potion. *Please don't let me die,* he begs Tom, and then he dips the ladle into the emerald brew and hesitantly sips.

It burns like fire slithering down his throat, coiling like flames in his stomach, throbbing like boiling steam as it spreads throughout his veins. He cries out, clutching to Snape for support, as it spreads throughout his body. “Burns,” he spits out, his face beaded with sweat, the heat growing behind his ears, his head beginning to pound.

“Weasley. Focus on my voice,” Severus says, his low and steady voice as a cool balm. Percy inhales raggedly and focuses on Severus as the man begins to outline calmly the ingredients in a Rejuvenation Draught.

“Better,” Percy sighs, and Severus soberly feeds him another sip.

The burn this time *is* better—perhaps because Percy knows what to expect. He breathes steadily, focusing on Severus’ voice, ignoring the way his magic seems to hiss and spit inside his body. In fact, he’s beginning to grow cooler...like the steam he imagines rising from his body has grown cold and fallen as droplets back onto his fevered flesh. He begins to shiver as his body reacts to the sudden change in temperature.

“Percy? What is it? What do you feel?”

He's only vaguely aware of Snape supporting his head as he spoons more lava into his throat. He normally may have claimed that physical pain could trump any other, but as he stares unseeingly ahead of himself, the smoulder of the potion is nothing compared to the pain of his heart that threatens to overwhelm his entire body.

For Percy sees his soul, or something like it, hovering in the air, and he sees that it is blackened and dirty and covered in slits, leaking golden sparks of magic into the air. He sees that he is nothing but a selfish, arrogant shell of a man, unable to befriend anyone other than a Death Eater and a ghost, unable to win the respect or love of his family. He's been in this new timeline for over a decade now, and he has accomplished nothing save for cursing his father with incredibly Dark magic and setting a basilisk on the school.

"Percy," Fred says, his voice weak and full of tears. "You're my big brother."

"I'm sorry," Percy sobs. "Fred, I'm so sorry. I didn't know what to do."

"But you knew what to do this time," says George, his voice harsh and unforgiving. Percy's soul pulses, and he watches with a terrified gaze as George's ghostly form leans over and tears part of it away. "You knew and you did nothing."

"Just another sip, Percy," Severus says from very far away.

Percy sips obediently and slumps even lower to the ground. His mother strikes him with her fiery hand and he moans in self-recrimination.

"You wanted me to marry the man who tried to destroy me," Molly says with scorn. "You are no son of mine, Percy."

"I'm sorry," he mumbles through slurred lips.

(He does not remember the rest of what he sees, but the pain and despair and hopelessness of it all will stay with him for the rest of his life. He will feel it every time he sees a Dementor, every time he wants to cry, every time he fails at something. He does not know it but Severus looks at him with something like pity as he faces his demons, as his family blames him for their deaths, as he watches his failures rip apart his soul with their hands, as he realises that he is nothing and never will be. In a way it is like the phoenix song he once heard: an indelible stamp on his soul that he will never be able to recall in its entirety.

For what Tom had known at this age, before time and power led him to forget, is that despair and fear can be worse than torture, that losing hope can sear more than the Cruciatus. Everyone has buried in their souls something to despair, and that desperation can be more debilitating than any number of curses.

Severus knows this intimately. So do the poor Ministry employees that huddled for hours in whatever small crevice they could find, scratching at their ears with ragged fingernails until they bled in a futile effort to escape the whispers of self-recrimination and fear wafting from the Dementors. So did the thirty four Muggles that plunged down a sickly and dizzying drop to their deaths on a bridge they thought to be safe—seven sets of parents exchanged one final look of hopelessness and love and sorrow as their children screamed for help in the backseat—so did Amelia Bones, sacrificing herself so her sister and niece could flee with their lives, so did Draco Malfoy, watching a professor's blood ebb slowly across his dining room table, his father's wand spinning in the hands of the most evil wizard of their time, so will Hermione Granger, pointing a steady wand at her parents as she erases herself from their lives. Without fear, Tom is nothing, and Percy understands that now, whereas he never did before).

Gradually Percy becomes aware, in a distant sort of way, that he's choking on a bezoar, retching out the foul green liquid. He has the presence of mind to panic—he cannot give up, he cannot do that again—but Severus shushes him, his voice low and soothing, his hands steady and comforting on Percy's shoulders.

"Drink," Severus says when Percy has finished vomiting. He hands Percy a glass bottle, filled with liquid, and Percy drinks eagerly. His mouth and stomach feel scorched and dry, like the blackened and charred tree stumps left behind by the giants' rampage.

"What…" Percy gasps out.

"Do not talk," Snape orders. "It was a locket. I retrieved it. Can you transform?"

Percy reaches inside of him for the core of magic that has been there for his entire life. *Destination, deliberation, determination*, he chants, and a second later the world swims and settles in front of his eyes as he shrinks.

He's vaguely aware that Severus picks him up, that they make their way slowly across the lake, that Severus keeps him under one arm as they plunge into the shockingly cold water and swim to the edge of the wards. Severus treads water for a second and then somehow spins on his heel in the water. With a flash, they are on dry land, and Percy realises belatedly that he is in his flat, his lynx nose pressed to the rug, smelling the old ink still stained onto the bristles.

"What happened?" He hears Tom demand.

"We retrieved a Horcrux for you, my Lord," Snape says. Percy shivers as the warmth of the other man's body leaves him, and then relaxes when the warming charm covers him like a blanket.

"You did? Where? Which one?"

"A locket, my Lord."

Tom sighs in deep appreciation. "A fitting Horcrux to use," he says. "Created with that infuriating Smith woman, you know. Let me see it."

"My Lord, do you know what Percy drank?"

"The Drought of Despair," Tom says dismissively. "The locket, Snape."

Percy blinks blearily. He manages to transform himself back to a person just in time to hear Tom shriek with rage.

"That is not my locket," Tom hisses angrily. "I used the Locket of Slytherin. This is a mere fake. You would have me believe this is my Horcrux, Snape? You dare try and mislead me?"

"It's—it's not real?" Percy croaks out.

A second later Snape is at his side. He feeds Percy something from a vial; the Rejuvenation Draught, he realises after it fills his belly with warmth.

"Open it," Tom demands.

Severus releases Percy, who struggles to sit upright on his couch, and plucks the locket from where he'd set it to hover in the air in front of Tom. "*To the Dark Lord,"* Severus begins to

read. Percy frowns and tries to focus. Severus is reading from a small scrap of parchment. Encased inside the locket? *"I know I will be dead long before you read this, but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret."* Severus pauses.

"Go on," Tom commands, his voice as cold as Percy has ever heard it.

"I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can. I face death in the hope that when you meet your match, you will be mortal once more. R.A.B."

Severus' face is inscrutable. Tom's is incandescent with rage. Percy's eyes flick between them nervously as he struggles to take in what had just happened.

They hadn't gotten a Horcrux. All of that, and they hadn't gotten a Horcrux.

"*Who is R.A.B.*?" Tom growls.

"My Lord...you do not know?"

Tom howls with anger, and Percy cries out, his head feeling like it may split. "My Lord," Percy gasps out. "We will find him. We will bring back the locket."

"Get the cup," Tom orders coldly. "I will take care of R.A.B. myself."

Severus helps Percy to his feet and leads him to his bedroom, where he once again collapses on his bed. Severus raises a series of wards, which spark uncomfortably on Percy’s clammy skin.

"The locket is fake?"

Severus nods quickly. "I thought I would bring you here and see if Tom knew who R.A.B may be. I believe it may be Regulus."

"Regulus Arcturus Black," Percy says, his voice still hoarse. "He turned against the Dark Lord?"

"It is unbelievable, but possible," Severus says, his words tumbling over themselves. "Regulus, he was—my friend. He died, without an explanation. We never knew why."

"Why would he turn against the Dark Lord?'

"Many of us longed to, if we thought it would not come to naught. His defeat was a relief to many. But to actually discover and destroy a Horcrux…" Severus shakes his head, and an expression of great tenderness flits briefly across his face, only to be swiftly replaced by his usual scowl. "Regulus must have been very brave."

"You think he did it? Destroyed it?"

"We will have to try and determine that. Sleep, now. Come tomorrow to the river. We will talk then."

***

That night, Percy dreams strange, disjointed dreams. They linger all day in the back of his mind as he cooks breakfast for the first time in many months, sends Hermes to Andromeda with a letter asking to meet again, and retells the entire story of the cave to Tom, who drinks it all in eagerly like he is meeting an old friend.

"I found that cave when I was six," Tom says with a small, private smile. "I sensed the magic from the nearby town and I followed it out of instinct."

"How did you find Slytherin's locket?" Percy asks enviously.

"I *am* descended from Salazar. It passed into my family."

When he arrives at the riverbank, he stumbles, woozy. Severus is already there, looking entirely incognito in Muggle jeans and a shirt. The sight is so ridiculous that some of the clouds in Percy's head clear at the sight of it.

Severus' forbidding face forestalls any comment on his clothing, so Percy very pointedly keeps his mouth shut.

"Regulus Black joined the Dark Lord right out of school," Severus begins after they have exchanged verification of their identities. "He was young and foolish and tasked with upholding the Black name, but he was never cruel, and he was very intelligent. I do not know how he learned of the Horcruxes but I do not doubt his ability to retrieve the locket."

"He must not have been alone," Percy says with a shudder. "That potion…"

Severus gives him an unreadable look. “Regulus was not very strong of character,” he concedes. “He was led often by self-doubt. I do not know if he would have been able to drink the potion and continue on.”

“You think he fed it to someone?”

“A spare,” Severus says with a nod. “Doubtlessly someone he later...removed.”

“He had no friends?”

Severus answers that with a searing look, and Percy nods in understanding.

"I believe we should return the locket," Snape continues. "I will go alone, now that we know how to evade the detections. I would rather He find the fake locket and spend His time tracking down Regulus, rather than believing it destroyed outright."

Percy nods. Part of him wants to be brave enough to suggest he return with Snape to the cave, but even the memory of the thrumming magic that still echoes in his ears is enough to make

him shudder.

“I wrote to Andromeda,” he says into the silence. “I believe she may be able to tell us more about Regulus.”

Severus snorts and turns away from Percy to look out at the black smoke that curls its way from the spires of the Muggle buildings, nearly too far down the bank to be visible. “Andromeda and Regulus did not get along, even as children. You will want to speak to Narcissa.”

“Well, we have to speak to her anyway,” he points out.

“Narcissa is under...strict watch,” says Severus darkly. He turns his head to give Percy a loaded glance. “What do you know of Albus’ death?”

Dumbledore’s death had shocked the entire country, sending ripples of discontent and fear and hopelessness into every household that still believed He Who Must Not Be Named may be defeated by the greatest wizard of their time. The revelation that bat of the dungeons *Severus Snape* had been the one to do it...that after years of Dumbledore defending him...that their *potion master* had finally lived up to the rumours that swirled around the hem of his robes...it had been unthinkable. It made every Hogwarts student, past or present, feel as though some of the sanctity of their childhood had been ripped away, as though some element of safety no longer existed.

“I do not know much,” Percy says quietly. “Aside from what we’ve previously spoken about.”

“Tell me again.”

Severus’ face looks as if it had been carved from the dark stone of the cliffs they had just escaped. Percy sighs and tries to gather his thoughts. “Well, I know that at the end of the year, Draco Malfoy lets a group of Death Eaters into Hogwarts, though I do not know how. The Death Eaters managed to corner Dumbledore on the Astronomy tower. You...you used the Killing Curse, and Dumbledore fell off the edge. Harry saw all of it.”

“Potter never revealed why? I thought he...defended me,” Severus says, a sneer twisting his thin lips into an expression of disgust.

“He said only that Dumbledore had ordered you to kill him,” Percy says. “That Dumbledore was dying anyway, and his murder would ensure the Dark Lord trusted you above all else.”

Severus nods once to himself and then turns to face Percy. “The Dark Lord has tasked Draco with killing Albus,” he says without preamble. “Narcissa Malfoy came to me four days ago and asked me to make an Unbreakable Vow that if he were to fail, I would step in and complete the task.”

Percy’s mouth drops open. “*What?* You...you didn’t make it, did you?”

“What choice did I have?” Severus snaps back coldly. “And as luck would have it, the Dark Lord has anyway requested that I follow through on the task when Draco inevitably falters. If you can believe the coincidence, Albus has asked me the very same thing, so I fail to see why an Unbreakable Vow with Narcissa should be any less binding than the instructions of either of my other masters.” Severus bites out the last word, voice heavy with derision.

Looking at Snape’s sallow face, his unkempt hair, his completely ridiculous Muggle outfit, Percy feels a tremendous surge of emotion. “I’m sorry, Severus,” he says gently. “This burden...it’s unthinkable.”

“I do not need your pity.”

“It is not pity,” he protests softly. “Sympathy, perhaps. I would say empathy, if I could dare imagine what you must be feeling. What they ask of you is not fair, and they offer you no recourse if you were to refuse.” Severus grunts in what could be agreement if one squinted and examined the sound closely. Percy presumes that Severus would not welcome any other comments along those lines and clears his throat, changing the subject abruptly. “Dumbledore is dying, then?”

“Yes.” Severus says curtly, a hint of annoyance crinkling the edge of his large nose. "He found a ring...heavily cursed. He put it on, though I cannot tell you why. I managed to contain the damage to his hand, but he will not live the year.”

“A ring,” Percy says thoughtfully. “A Horcrux?” None of the Founder’s Objects were rumoured to be, specifically, a ring...though the Founders certainly owned and likely enchanted quite a lot of jewellery. But Tom had not mentioned a ring, nor had Harry, nor had any of the research he’d done into Tom Riddle turned up any mention of a ring.

Severus shrugs lightly, likely having reached the same conclusion as Percy. “Perhaps. Albus does not...appear to trust me with news of the Horcruxes.”

“Why? Surely he trusts you above everyone else,” protests Percy.

“I believe he thinks my position makes me *vulnerable*,” bites out Snape.

“But nobody is better at Occlumency than you. Isn’t that what he told Harry?”

“Evidently he said that only to convince Potter to acquiesce to the lessons.”

Percy once again glances at Snape’s thunderous expression and decides quickly to change the subject. “The ring...do you know what it looks like?”

Severus reaches into his pocket and withdraws a stiff square of thick parchment, on which he has drawn a rendering of a small, crudely constructed ring. “It was gold,” he says, pointing with a long finger to the band. “Clumsily made; I believe it may have been stripped for gems around the band, or resized poorly to fit a finger. This was a black stone.” He points to a symbol he’d drawn in the corner, a bisected triangle encasing a circle. “This was etched into the stone.”

The symbol looks vaguely familiar to Percy, like he had seen it in a book. It is not a rune...it is not quite elaborate enough to be a crest...but he cannot imagine what it may be. “It does not look merely decorative,” he says, reaching out with a finger to trace Severus’ drawing. “I will research it.”

“It is not the Gaunt crest, is it?”

“No,” Percy says, shaking his head. “I’ve seen the Gaunt crest in a book Tobias Greengrass lent to me during school. I think it may be a crude rune, perhaps in an invented or ancient language.”

“Albus said he was tempted…”

They share a glance. The ring suddenly looks more foreboding. Percy does not know how powerful something would have to be to tempt Albus Dumbledore, but he imagines it would have to be powerful indeed.

“I have your *enchanted notebook* so we may communicate, though I fear I will be far too busy to speak often,” Severus continues, breaking the solemn silence that had settled over them both. “I will watch over Draco and try to prevent him from succeeding in his task until we are ready. I will try and investigate what happened to Regulus and see if I can determine what he did with the locket. I will also research the ring and see if it holds any relevance to us.”

Percy nods. “I will also research the locket,” he says. “Perhaps it is in Grimmauld Place or Regulus’ Gringotts vault. I will try and monitor Narcissa’s vault to see if she makes any withdrawals. We need to speak with her, Severus.”

“She is being watched,” he repeats. “But I will see if I can invent a reason for her to speak with me privately. Also, I told Dumbledore to allow you entrance into Regulus’ room as your entryway into Grimmauld Place; I mentioned that it remains unused and that Potter and his friends are unlikely to broach Black’s privacy by entering.”

“That was smart,” says Percy admiringly. “I will look through it thoroughly, of course, though I doubt Regulus left the Horcrux somewhere so easily accessible if he did not destroy it. We’re getting closer, though. Of the six Horcruxes we know of Tom’s diary, Hufflepuff’s cup, Slytherin’s locket, and Ravenclaw’s diadem,” Percy continues. “I think it likely Gryffindor’s sword may be the next one...perhaps we can use the Sorting Hat to summon it and investigate it.”

“That makes only five,” Severus points out unnecessarily.

Percy starts in remembrance and tells Severus of what he’d overhead the Dark Lord say in the Ministry. “I fear he is making another,” he finishes. “Which could mean either that he never completed all six prior to his death, or he is unstable enough to believe making more would be tenable.”

Severus purses his lips together. He does not have to say what they both know; if Voldemort begins to make more Horcruxes, they will never truly know when their task has finished.

“We will proceed with the five,” Severus says finally. “When you next come to Hogwarts we will try for the sword. Perhaps I should tell my suspicions to Albus...I feel he must be searching for the Horcruxes already. If he dies at the end of the year, he will have to tell Potter what he knows. Perhaps we can use that to our advantage.”

Percy nods thoughtfully. “And the Mark?”

Severus exhales forcefully. “I have suggested to Him that He not Mark Draco. I have said that Albus plans to search each student for the Mark upon their return to school.”

Percy swallows against the lurch in his stomach and tries to straighten his shoulders. “If I do not have to be Marked, I will join.”

“You do not need to be Marked to be in his service,” says Severus silkily. “It is no simple matter to pledge the vow to serve the Dark Lord.”

“We don’t know what the last Horcrux is,” Percy says, his voice growing more steady as he continues. “We don’t know if he’s making any more Horcruxes. You can’t do it all alone, Severus. If I join his forces, I will be able to investigate as well. We *need* to know what they are.”

Severus holds his gaze for a long, silent moment and then nods. “Practise your Occlumency,” he orders. “I shall test you before I allow you to present yourself. You will have to think of a reason why you cannot be Marked...you are not a student.”

“But I *am* Junior Assistant to the Minister.”

“He will want a way to watch you. You will not be trusted; you are an obvious choice to be planted by Dumbledore as a spy.”

“Well, what if he can watch me?” Percy thinks of the pile of buttons in his room, waiting to be turned into localised wards. “What if I can wear something, a bracelet or a ring, something that will mimic the properties of the Mark without branding my skin so visibly.”

“That may work,” Severus says thoughtfully.

Percy finds that Tom is an extremely helpful asset in the process of replicating his Dark Mark into a ring. The enchantments behind the Dark Mark are truly brilliant; seventeen year Tom had done absolutely indescribable things with the Protean Charm that Percy would never have thought possible. If Percy had any doubts about his desire to study soul magic, after this is all over, they would have been completely assuaged by the revelation that Tom corrupted an ancient ritual to lay an indelible mark on his victim’s soul. Tom says it merely binds the magic, but Percy knows enough about the magic-soul duality to understand that to do one is to do the other.

The Dark Mark sits like a parasite on the victim’s soul, absorbing and monitoring its magic. It does not do anything as plebeian as allow Tom to spy on his victims, per se, but it allows him to feed off their magic, to exert control over it if necessary, to find them at any moment, and to render them immobile with a touch of his wand. In a way, it is similar to the ritual to create

the Horcrux, or at least what Severus believes is the ritual to create a Horcrux. Just as it binds the victim to Tom, so it binds Tom to the victim, such that it darkened of its own accord as Tom grew stronger, such that Percy rather suspects the victims at times feed off Tom's magic too.

It is an interesting question: when Tom is destroyed, truly destroyed, will it harm all of the Death Eaters indelibly? Will part of their souls be ripped when Tom loses all of his? If Percy must be Marked, will he suffer the same fate?

Tom likes the idea of a brand, but he likes the idea of a ring, too. The decision to mark every single follower with a very conspicuous tattoo is the kind of idea that appeals much more to a teenager than to an adult. The diadem Tom is closer to Percy's true age; he can see the problem with marking every single follower. Jewellery would be much less conspicuous.

"I've been thinking," Tom says, lazily, but Percy is attuned enough to the portrait to hear the low thrum of intensity in his voice. Percy does not look up from the silver ring he is experimenting with, but the muscles in his back tense. "I believe you should present me to the Dark Lord."

At this, Percy cannot help his head from snapping up. "*What*?"

Tom leans back with a smirk. "It is clear he will need to be eliminated," he says coolly, as if the answer were obvious. "It is equally clear that I cannot trust you to find the Horcruxes."

"He may destroy you," Percy points out. "You *are* planning on eliminating him."

"I can convince him otherwise," says Tom self-assuredly.

"Or he'll use you to augment his own power," Percy argues. One slim advantage they have is the Dark Lord is undeniably erratic, and more than a little mad. To think of him as more sane...it would be a disaster. "What if he checks on the other Horcruxes and finds them gone?"

Tom's voice is low and intent. "He won't. I am the stronger piece of soul, Percy. You know this."

"We don't *know* that—"

"We do," asserts Tom. "I am an early Horcrux. What exists now as Lord Voldemort is nothing but a shade of me, though it may appear to be the opposite. I believe that being close to him will help me augment my power."

Yet another thing for Percy to worry about. He clears his throat and casts around for an excuse. "But then we would not be able to communicate."

"Paint another portrait here; a background. I will be able to travel between them. We will communicate without him knowing."

Percy honestly should have seen this coming. He hesitates, unable to decide how to force the issue; he absolutely cannot introduce Tom to Voldemort, but what can he say otherwise?

“We’ll have a direct line into the Death Eaters,” Tom says, his voice honeyed and convincing. “He shan’t think of looking at the other Horcruxes. I’ll convince him otherwise. He won’t think I’m a threat, since I am merely a portrait, and he’ll reward you handsomely for my discovery. You won’t get very far as a lowly Death Eater, Percy. You haven’t fooled me; I know you want to destroy the Dark Lord.”

“I—”

Tom smiles, and it is almost sad. “I want to destroy him too. He is not me. I can live without that part of my soul, but what he is trying now is liable to destroy everything I have ever worked on. I know you, Percy. The world I hope to create is a world you want, too. I do not want needless war and fighting. I care little for the affairs of Muggles and Mudbloods. I am not a murderer. I want only to make our society stronger, to further our understanding of magic, and to leave behind the archaic and stifling conditions that have prevented our society from progressing past the Dark Ages. I have not yet given myself entirely to the Dark Arts as *he* has. I am not him, Percy. I am the boy you spoke to in the diary; I am powerful, I am ambitious, I am capable, but I am not evil, not yet.”

Percy swallows roughly around a lump in his throat. “I want to destroy him because he is destroying us,” he says softly. “I cannot risk that you will betray that goal.”

“I will not,” Tom says. He sighs and meets Percy’s gaze, his serious expression incredibly lifelike despite the layers of paint. “I...am not proud of what I have seen from him,” he says slowly, softly, as if the very words are tortuous to admit to in front of Percy. This, more than anything, convinces Percy. Tom is incredibly vain; to admit to these failings is incredibly humbling. “But it is not too late for me. It is not too late for us, for all of us. You understand that, don’t you? If you saw a mistake that you’d made, and you had a chance to right those wrongs, you’d do it, wouldn’t you? Even if it meant destroying part of yourself.”

Percy *had* done it. He’d destroyed whatever version of himself lived in that previous timeline; he’d destroyed the whole timeline, if some theorists were to be believed. At best he’d left behind a visible absence, a family who would mourn his disappearance without ever understanding his motives for leaving, a life that would never satisfactorily be ended. He’d never get word to them, never explain to their faces why his actions were worth it.

And he’d done it out of selfishness, hadn’t he? As much as he pretends to have a higher, noble purpose, he had travelled back in time to save his brother and absolve himself of the great, burdensome guilt of not acting when action was just and right.

“You can trust me,” Tom continues softly. Percy looks up to find the portrait watching him intently. “I promise, Percy. Trust not my word but my disgust at what he is, if you must. But trust me.”

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August 1996

"No," says Severus.

"I do trust him," says Percy. They do not have much time; as the summer draws to a close, Severus becomes increasingly busy. This may be their last furtive meeting at the riverbank. "And he's right. The Dark Lord will never trust me, particularly if I am trying to argue my way out of a Dark Mark. Even if he does let me in, he'll hardly involve me in anything that matters."

"Tom will betray us both to the Dark Lord at the earliest opportunity," Severus says over the end of Percy's words, his voice stern.

"I really do not believe that he will."

"You would be risking my life and yours, and I will not allow you to risk mine. This discussion is over."

"Severus—"

"You may not call me Severus, if you insist on acting like a beleaguered child," bites Severus, and Percy swallows angrily past the entreaty he had been planning. "I have been researching Horcruxes…extensively. We must view Tom as a version of *Him*, as dangerous in his own right. We are not handing him a wand and standing in line to be felled."

But Percy does not abandon the idea. It lingers in his mind, and he begins working on the background he will need to maintain in his flat. For convenience's sake, he copies the previous design, and Tom supervises him, occasionally adding his own commentary.

(At night, he researches vows. He may trust Tom, but only to an extent. If portraits have enough magic to speak and think and conjure books out of a painted bookcase, do they have enough magic to make a vow? Unbreakable Vows rely on souls, but some rely on magic. Percy has sworn three vows in his life: one to Tom, on the basis of his magic; one to Severus, bound to nothing more than their shared respect; and one to Dumbledore, with his soul on the line should he err. All are binding in their own way, so why shouldn't he able to bind a portrait as well?)

Percy is so busy that he cannot work as well on the localised anti-Apparition wards he was hoping to build. He writes out a detailed summary of his work and sends it to McGonagall, buried in several notes of Transfiguration theory, which he hopes would be dizzying enough to befuddle the casual interceptor. He includes a vague reference to twins in his summary, hoping she will pass the notes along to Fred and George, whom of all of his siblings he believes have the best chance at turning his thoughts into a practical reality. Percy has never respected jokes, but he does respect their command of magic, and he remembers vividly some of the innovations they came up with during the first version of this war.

Scrimgeour replaces Fudge as Minister. Percy is promoted, after Scrimgeour sends him unexpectedly to take the next in the series of qualification exams he technically ought to pass before being eligible for the position, an old, somewhat antiquated tradition from the days

when everyone was an apprentice, academic or otherwise. Percy passes them as easily, and takes a second to send his regards through time to the version of himself who was so anxious and harried that he'd studied for three days straight without pause. In this timeline, like in the last, Percy is not entirely sure why Scrimgeour chooses *him* to ascend straight to the top, but like in both timelines, Percy does not bother to question it, not when it dovetails so nicely with his own plans.

Percy sends a clipping of the newspaper article announcing his promotion to Aunt Muriel, who receives it gleefully. He goes to visit her during the middle of August at Shell Cottage, her summer home by the beach, where they normally Floo to do the summer solstice. It is too late for the ritual, but they stand companionably by the water nevertheless, breathing in the cold spray and allowing the crashing of the waves sooth some of the turbulence in their thoughts. Auntie Muriel looks old, he realises with a pang, old and tired, with thin veins under her eyes and stretched out, papery skin.

"Don't get yourself killed," Aunt Muriel tells him sternly after they stand in silence for nearly an hour. Despite her age, Aunt Muriel stands uncomplainingly, firmer than Percy would expect, given how loudly and onerously she complains about needing assistance at any family gatherings, a ploy he'd soon realised in this lifetime was an attempt to cajole a younger member of the family to talk to her. "Radicals and protestors are often killed for very little reward."

"I won't," he promises her. "I am not an idiot, Auntie."

"Idiotic enough to tangle with Albus Dumbledore," she sniffs haughtily. Percy had told her of his induction into the Order, and she had been less than pleased. "The things I know about that man would make your hair curl even more than it already does."

It is from Aunt Muriel that Percy learns of the rumours of Albus Dumbledore's wicked past. Percy had never read Rita Skeeter's book; Harry had come out after the war and strongly condemned it, and prior to that Percy had not had time for speculative fiction, but he wonders now if what Muriel says is all true. A Squib sister? A duel to the death? No funeral?

"Oh, yes," Aunt Muriel cackles at Percy's wide-eyed look. "Albus is no gold Galleon, let me tell you."

"Aberforth thinks he killed his sister?"

Aunt Muriel shrugs and turns, reaching out for Percy's support as she navigates the tricky path back to the house. "Well, according to my cousin Barry, who of course was *particular* friends with Aberforth, if you catch my meaning. My mother always thought it was merely resentment: imagine, you're the second Dumbledore son, and all you do is own a nasty little pub. Once Rita finishes her book, it'll be all out there, anyway."

Percy privately thinks it is unlikely that Albus Dumbledore—for all Percy dislikes the man—murdered his own kin. Percy has no trouble imagining Aberforth resenting Albus' success, however. And perhaps Dumbledore was indirectly responsible for Ariana's death; maybe the family spent all their money on Albus, or neglected Ariana in some other way, or perhaps she wandered into the bad end of his wand. But it's an odd thought, to think of Dumbledore's

actions in the context of an old man responsible for the death of a younger sibling. Percy certainly does not need to feel *pity* for Dumbledore, and of course the death must have been many years ago, though he supposes he knows better than most that such a pain never truly goes away.

“I want you to stay safe, Aunt Muriel,” says Percy, changing the topic. “There’s a war coming, and I worry for you, alone at Shell Cottage.”

“The rest of your blasted family is up to their freckles in whatever is going on, so don’t worry about me,” sniffs Aunt Muriel with a grimace. She snaps her fingers to the house elf, who bows slowly and makes his languid way off to the kitchen to fetch some tea. If Percy had a house elf, he’d want one with a bit more vigour, particularly since he’s hungry nearly all the time now, his appetite returning to him in a fervour now that Barty no longer hovers above his every move. “And I won’t be alone. Did you know that William is trying to make this a safe house? Without so much as a how-do-you-do for his dear old Aunt. Nice to have some company, though.”

Percy rolls his eyes. He's happy, objectively, that Bill will ward Shell Cottage, but it is a classic Bill move to not consider Aunt Muriel's feelings on the matter. “A safe house that will house refugees, or a safe house for you and Bill?”

"I bloody hope a safe house for William and I only,” says his aunt with a shudder. “I’m too old to be housing strays. You’re welcome to come as well, boy. It would be nice to have my heir by my side."

"I am content where I am for now," Percy says truthfully. "I reckon I’ll spend some nights at the Order headquarters, so you don’t need to worry about my safety. But the war is going to get worse, Auntie. You had best be prepared."

"I have lived through two wars already, and I shan't be killed in this war, either. You tell your family the same, you understand? There is an excess of you but I do not want any of you to be killed." his aunt grumbles. To move quickly beyond the sentimentality, she continues, "What of Charles? He is not returning to put his life on the line?"

Percy had not heard from Charlie in many months. He does not want to risk writing to him; in the last timeline, Charlie had hid out the entire war in Romania, which while not entirely honourable, was by far the safest course of action. No, best to let Charlie stay exactly where he is. One fewer brother for Percy to worry about, after all.

"I sincerely hope not."

"Maybe you can send Ginevra and Ronald out of the country," Aunt Muriel muses. "Ginevra especially. She is far too delicate for a war."

Given that Ginny somehow manages to run a year-long resistance campaign against two high level Death Eaters at sixteen, Percy does not particularly think she is *too delicate* for any of what follows. Ron, perhaps, but not Ginny. Nevertheless, he'd rather she not have to rise to the occasion. It bears thought.

To his surprise, the next morning at breakfast, the Prewett house elf creakily announces a visitor in the middle of the postprandial tea. Percy looks up in surprise, the *Daily Prophet* crinkling in his hands. A visitor? Aunt Muriel looks displeased but hoists herself up and orders the house elf to show the guest to the parlour, or what passes for it in the tiny Shell Cottage.

Their visitor is McGonagall, wearing her standard black robes, her hair pulled back tightly into its standard bun. When she turns to face them, her robes move stiffly, and he narrows his eyes at her, recognizing the sound of bandages concealed beneath her clothes. Nearly invisible near her hair line is a faint, shimmery magical scar, clearly still healing.

“What *happened*?”

McGonagall and Auntie Muriel make the exact same sniff at his rude outburst. Percy catches himself quickly and colours in embarrassment, rephrasing his question. “You look unwell, Professor.”

McGonagall presses her lips together tightly. “Some Aurors thought it prudent to remove me from the school.”

Aunt Muriel cackles. “Hope you got the better of them, Minerva.”

McGonagall barks out a laugh and then looks faintly surprised at herself. “I did my best, Muriel. May I speak to your heir in private?”

Percy turns pleading eyes on his aunt, who archly ignores him. "Look after this one," she orders before hobbling out of the room.

Left alone with McGonagall, Percy feels suddenly once again like an eleven year old, sitting in her office during his first year, waiting for her judgement.

They exchange pleasantries; she compliments the work he'd sent her to pass on to the twins, he inquires after her recovery from her injuries, they spend a few neutral minutes discussing how dreadful all of the past months have been.

Then she walks briskly over to Aunt Muriel's side table, pours two glasses of her finest centaur-made Scotch, hand-turned in barrels by the foals of the litter, and levitates one to Percy without comment.

Percy takes his glass hesitantly. It's barely ten in the morning, and he does not have the stomach for alcohol these days, if he ever did. Not to mention it’s an odd sensation to be handed alcohol by a former professor, least of all *this* former professor.

Percy admittedly has not thought very much about how to interact with McGonagall, mostly because every time he contemplates how he feels about her, he feels a weird swirl in his stomach and pushes his attention otherwise. There’s gladness, he supposes, that she finally knows the truth about him, mixed with a lingering guilt that he has not told her fully the truth, but he can’t say what else may be circulating inside him and contributing to the slightly queasy feeling he has now.

“Why did you not feel you could trust me?” McGonagall begins, as McGonagall is wont to do, by going straight for the jugular.

Percy considers his glass but thinks it unwise to take a sip so early in the conversation. “I didn’t know who to trust, Professor.”

“And yet you had no trouble trusting Severus Snape,” points out McGonagall archly. She exhales through her nose and says, “I, of course, think very highly of Severus; but it is unlikely for any of his former students to think the same, even those like yourself, who enjoyed an intimacy that was, you must admit, atypical for him.”

Percy has to wrinkle his nose at *intimacy*. “Severus caught me practising Dark Magic, in Hogwarts,” he admits, figuring it better to tell a partial truth than an untenable lie. “He told me that he had been a Death Eater in the last war, but that he regretted it, had he been older when he had made the choice to study Dark Magic. When I learned that Barty was a Death Eater and started to realise that I may be in over my head, I thought Severus a more natural choice of confidant.”

“And what is it that you felt you must confide to Severus?”

“I’m not sure I understand what you’re asking, Professor.”

McGonagall leans forward and pins him under the type of glare that will always, *always* make Percy feel like he is eleven years old. “I am not convinced that this…scheme of yours will pay the dividends to justify the danger you are placing yourself in, Mr. Weasley. I wish to better understand what insights you believe you may win from this juncture.”

“What would you have me do, Professor?” Percy demands, clutching his glass tightly. “Quit, now? The Dark Lord has returned, and they will either believe me to be aligned with the cause or to be a blood traitor. Even if I were not attempting to spy, I would need to decide which of the two I’d rather be seen as.”

“Severus asked me to look after you,” McGonagall says, raising an eyebrow. “I would prefer you keep out of danger all together, if possible. I offered you an apprenticeship once, Mr. Weasley, and I am happy to do it again.”

Percy does not even have to think about it. “Professor, I cannot pass this war hiding out in Hogwarts.” *And anyway*, he adds in his head, *Hogwarts will be a Death Eater’s camp in a year’s time.*

“You will *die*, Mr. Weasley,” snaps his old professor, and suddenly he sees a surprising line of vulnerability wavering around her thin, wrinkled lips. He is so used to thinking of McGonagall as infallible and inscrutable that to see even a hint of a waver on her normally taciturn face is deeply unsettling. “I am not in the business of sending my former students out to die without cause.”

“But it’s not without cause,” Percy says, and something softens his voice until he’s almost pleading. “Professor, I know you must think little of me, and I cannot blame you. I often think little of myself, too. But think of the Order, Professor. I went to King’s Cross last winter

and they were all gathered, dropping Harry and my brothers off at school, with Sirius Black running around as an Animagus! I know Dumbledore is one of the most powerful wizards of all time, and I'm not disagreeing with that, but do you really think they'll be able to win a war just with the *power of love?* I've seen the Death Eaters, Professor. I worked with one for an entire year. They have money, power, cunning, and a plan."

"So your plan is to—what, circumvent the Order entirely?"

Percy shrugs. In truth he does not know what he planned to do with the Order, given he'd all but written them off long before, figuring there was no way to interact with them without revealing his many secrets. Now that Severus has forced his hand, he is not sure how to best proceed. "I think I can get us information that we need, information that might help to balance the odds. You said it yourself; everyone's frightened of Severus, but nobody is frightened of me. Barty Crouch told me all about how he resurrected the Dark Lord, just because he thought I was impressed by it. Narcissa Malfoy invited me into her house every week for a year. Lucius is so tempted by the idea of *stealing* me from my father that he personally vouched for me in front of the Dark Lord himself. We don't have anyone else in the Order that could say the same, not unless we recruit Draco Malfoy or one of the other younger Death Eaters, and I can't imagine who that may be."

McGonagall snorts, perhaps at the image of going to Draco Malfoy for help. They subside into silence, and McGonagall takes a contemplative sip of her Scotch, though Percy doesn't dare try his. He sneaks glances at her as she thinks, noticing again how fragile his professor looks, despite the robes she clearly put on as armour, her brown eyes watery in her lined, old face.

"You are right," she says to his surprise. His cheeks burn; without anything else to do, Percy takes a hasty sip of the Scotch, coughing as it snakes its way hotly down his throat. When he looks up again, eyes watering, he sees something approaching a smile on her face, her amusement more familiar than her worry.

"You have correctly observed that the other side is all too ready to assume that you are one of them," McGonagall continues. "You are young, you are resentful, you are ambitious. The younger members may trust you; the older members may let their guard down around you. In truth, I believe the idea to be clever, albeit incredibly dangerous. I know you, Percy, and I will not be able to convince you not to do it if you have already decided. Furthermore, as you point out, Mr. Weasley, I believe the Order needs you." She raises a hand to forestall his questions. "I know you are concerned with the efficacy of the group. I know you have a keen mind and a talent for magic, not to mention organisation. I will be the first to admit that Albus, while brilliant, has a tendency to lose sight of minutiae in favour of the *greater good*, so to speak. Mr. Weasley, you have always been talented at minutiae."

He huffs out a surprised laugh. "That's one way to put it."

"Let us—let me—protect you," she continues, more softly. "Let Severus protect you. This war will not be won by any of you young men and women on your own, Percy. Trust an old woman on this. I have lived through two Wizarding wars already, and I know that constant vigilance, small but steady battles, and above all *common sense* and foresight are what are

necessary to win a war, not showy contests of spells and childish declarations of pride. Now, show me to a seat before I collapse on your floor."

Percy is glad for the interruption; he has absolutely no idea what to say, or even where to start. Instead, he mutely leads her over to Aunt Muriel's usual seat and holds out his arm for her to steady herself on as she lowers herself into the armchair. Her grip is tight on his arm, too tight, and he swallows roughly at the idea that McGonagall is getting irrevocably *old.*

He retreats and takes his own seat in the small leather chair opposite. Despite her age, his former professor pins him with her legendary *for troublemakers only* glare.

Percy takes another gulp of the Scotch. His neck begins to glow faintly with the heat. "Nobody ever gets one over you, do they, Professor."

"Not for long," McGonagall says with satisfaction.

She allows him to think through his response, watching him carefully but not impatiently as he swirls the liquid around in his glass and considers what to say.

"How am I to help if Dumbledore won't even allow me access to the rest of the Order?"

McGonagall waves her hand as if to brush away his concern. "You have access to Headquarters, and I will meet you there. We will discuss. It will be like our tutelage, though our area of study will be the Order, rather than the mysteries of magic I know are so interesting to you. You have already insisted to Albus that you wish to be responsible for establishing safehouses and escape protocols—which left a favourable impression on Alastor, I might add, who has been pushing for the very same for weeks—and so we will begin there and move on as needed."

Percy hesitates and then says, "Professor, I have reason to believe that I have some information that would…" He searches for the word and then begins again. "I have information that I do not wish to be given to the Headmaster."

She raises an eyebrow. "And why is that?"

"Not yet, anyway," he hastens to add. He and Severus had decided to wait just a little longer before informing Dumbledore about their research into the Horcruxes. They still believe it prudent to allow him to make as much headway as possible before possibly corrupting his process with their own ideas. "Severus—I mean, Professor Snape—agrees with me."

McGonagall's eyebrow remains raised. "Why?"

He bites his lip before responding. "We believe we have obtained information about something that is providing the Dark Lord with power," he says carefully. "We have reason to believe the Headmaster is searching for the same...weapons, shall we say. We believe our chances of success are higher if we do not influence each other's search. It is difficult not to act on other's assumptions once you know them."

The other eyebrow ascends to meet the first as she mulls over what he said. "But we ought to aim for efficiency, should we not?" McGonagall counters. "Why waste time to allow you both to research the same thing?"

"Professor, if we are wrong about this, it would be catastrophic," Percy says lowly. "We believe the Headmaster is already beginning to search for these weapons, and he has not confided in you nor Professor Snape. Why? What if he misleads us in an attempt to forestall our efforts? What if we are wrong, and he wastes time on that error?"

"Albus is a brilliant man," she argues. "I think you ought to trust him. The Order does not keep secrets, Mr. Weasley. You ought to learn that now. We are stronger together than we are apart."

"Professor…" Percy looks her solidly in the eye. "Professor, did you know the Headmaster has been cursed and has barely a year to live?"

McGonagall stares at him, nonplussed, and then takes her turn to drink hastily out of her glass.

"Look at his hand. Professor Snape barely managed to contain the curse. He ordered him not to tell. Professor, Draco Malfoy has been instructed to kill the Headmaster, and the Headmaster ordered Professor Snape to complete the task if Draco fails. He told you *none* of this. Not to mention, my very presence in the Order is a secret, is it not?"

McGonagall takes another shaky sip. "We need to trust the Headmaster," she insists, though Percy notes that she does not question the truth of what he is saying.

"The Headmaster needs to trust *us*, but he does not. He is acting unpredictably. I am not saying this out of any pride, Professor. Professor Snape agrees with me. Professor, imagine…" he trails off and then forges forward, almost desperately. "Imagine if at the end of the year, Professor Snape murders Albus Dumbledore. It will be public, it will be cruel, it will be a massive shock to us all. We can see why that would aid his position with the Dark Lord. But I do not believe the Headmaster intends to tell you. The war will be even more devastating, and you will believe that your closest ally has killed your leader. Why? Because you cannot feign surprise? Because you cannot protect your mind? I understand not telling Harry, who cannot master Occlumency, but to not tell you? Moody? Shacklebolt? He has asked Severus to kill him, Professor."

"I do not believe he would keep such a thing a secret," McGonagall insists.

"He *will*, Professor! You've got to trust me. He is following a plan we cannot see, and sure, let's let him set the plan. We won't interfere; we won't betray his trust. But we must have our own plan, Professor. Ask him about his hand. Ask him where he disappears to during the year. Ask him what Draco Malfoy is up to. He will tell you nothing."

"And if the Headmaster is keeping secrets from Severus and I, may I inquire how you of all people know these secrets?"

Percy looks at her directly in the eyes so that he knows he is telling the truth. “Professor, as you know, Barty Crouch, Jr. was impersonating his father all year.” This truth, he thinks, may be sufficient to justify his actions without forcing his hand further. “He was watching me very carefully; I could not communicate with anybody other than Severus. He helped resurrect the Dark Lord, together with Pettigrew. He was obsessively watching Dumbledore and Moody.”

McGonagall drains the rest of the glass. "I do not believe you, Mr. Weasley," she says frostily. "About Albus. I have known Albus for my entire life. If what you say is true—then he must have a reason for it."

Percy sighs and slumps back in his chair. "You asked what I need from you and I need you to trust me on this," he says moodily.

"Which returns us to my original point," McGonagall says, not unkindly, but not kindly, either. “Your plan is to spy? For what end?”

"Spy, I suppose, to figure out what may be giving the Dark Lord this power. In truth I don’t know if this will be of use to anyone in the day to day, but it will be of use to us in the end." Percy sighs and drains the rest of his Scotch, ignoring how it slithers hotly down his throat. "Professor, I am not *boasting* when I say that what I am doing is too important to risk. Nobody aside from you and Severus can know. If Dumbledore fails, we will need somebody in the background who can aid Harry from afar, and we both know it won’t be Severus, not with his relationship to Harry. I want to spy, and pass the Order information about incoming attacks, and slip notes about who is a Death Eater, and all of those things I expect you are all imagining when you think of me, but I cannot do anything to risk our investigation into what this power is. When I tell Dumbledore—and I will, I promise, I am just waiting to gather more information—I know he will agree with me completely."

"In a way, you are the opposite of Severus," McGonagall observes to his surprise. "The Order never will trust him fully, and the Death Eaters will never fully accept you. I understand what you are saying, about the limits to what you may pass to us, but I would like you to share with me everything you learn nevertheless. Give me your trust, and in exchange, I will work with you and Severus and Albus as needed to decide what to share with the rest of the Order.” She pauses, finishes her Scotch, and then adds without a hint of a cough or a splutter, “And if Albus truly is to pass soon, the Order will need leadership that I can provide. Trust *me,* Percy.″

It is Percy's turn to hesitate, though he does not dare another sip.

“If what you say is true, Severus will be constrained by the end of the year,” McGonagall points out. “I will be able to remain in Hogwarts, I hope, and act from there. We need your help, Percy, even if your help leans more to the logistical and less to the clandestine.”

“The Order is woefully underprepared for actual war,” Percy agrees.

McGonagall stands and banishes her glass to the side cabinet with a silent flick of her wand. “I asked you once to be my apprentice, and I am asking you now to be my partner.”

Percy stands as well. Though handshakes are not particularly common in the Wizarding World, he finds himself holding out his hand, as if the Muggle gesture will seal their deal more indelibly than their words. After a second, she takes his hand, and her own is far softer than he would have thought.

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It's a relief to meet with Andromeda; she at least trusts what he has to say, and so he does waste any time with the pleasantries before informing her that he needs a way into the vault, and he needs to learn about Regulus Black.

"You cannot get into the vault without Narcissa," Andromeda insists. "It is protected thoroughly. Neither Imperius nor disguise will get you in, and an attempt with either will land you in their version of a court of law, and I promise you that you will never leave the bank again."

"Do you think you could convince her to take you?" Percy presses. He hands her a drawing he had made with the cup and the locket. "We believe one of these is in the vault, if not both."

"Is that—oh, my," Andromeda breathes, tracing a finger over the intricate *H* that Percy had carefully rendered on the cup. "I see. I will try."

"And Regulus? He stole one of these, and he left a note that he destroyed it."

Andromeda takes that revelation well, only blinking before smoothing her face back into her customary blank look. "He turned from the Dark Lord?"

Percy pauses, realising belatedly that for Andromeda, learning her cousin had not been a Death Eater until the very end would be somewhat emotional of an experience. He tries to soften his voice. "He did. We believe the Dark Lord killed him for it."

Andromeda's hand tightens on the parchment. Percy lets go automatically. "I can't let him have all the glory," she sniffs haughtily, though Percy thinks he can detect the faintest glimmer of tears in her eyes. "I'll convince Cissa to let me in the vault."

"We need to do it quickly," he cautions. "In truth I do not know for sure the cup is there; I merely suspect it. He may move it, now that the vault no longer is owned by Bellatrix."

"You killed her, didn't you," Andromeda says bluntly, giving him a cool glance. "I thought you might after I let you know that Narcissa would be the inheritor."

Percy clears his throat uncomfortably, ears tinging red. "I—yes," he says, straightening. He may have killed Andromeda's sister but he won't dishonour her by lying to her about it. "I'm sorry."

"You're not," she observes shrewdly, before sighing. "I am not either, in truth. At least she is now at peace."

“She was torturing Tonks,” Percy says quietly, looking at the floor. “I just…”

Andromeda says crisply, “You love my daughter.” At Percy’s wide-eyed, panicked look, she allows something like a smile to cross her lips. “I did not say as a lover,” she points out, ignoring how Percy’s shock makes way to a deep, burning flush at the unexpected word. “Perhaps as a cousin, or as a friend. I was wondering how you summoned up the strength to kill Bella, but I see now it was borne out of love.”

Percy adjusts his glasses and changes the topic abruptly. Any feelings he may have toward Tonks, whether romantic or familial or otherwise, are hardly something he cares to think about alone, let alone discuss with her mother, and his motivations around killing Bellatrix are too raw for him to think through. "Bellatrix did not return as a ghost."

Andromeda's smile is tight. "She would not. Nor will I, nor Regulus, nor Cissa. To return as a ghost would bring shame to our family. Our legacy must be continued by our descendants; to linger would be to imply we do not believe them to be strong."

"Why do you—" Percy begins, and then pulls himself up abruptly, flushing. She lifts an eyebrow at him and he continues weakly, "It's just, you speak of the Black name with…"

"With honour," she completes when he cannot grasp what to say. "Yes. I do not regret marrying Ted, nor do I regret Nymphadora, but I do regret my impetuosity in daring my parents to strike me from the lineage. I am a Black, and I am proud of our history. I wish I had the courage to stay, to show my ancestors and my descendants that one can be a Black and live without darkness, without shame."

"Have you spoken to Sirius?"

"We are not close anymore," Andromeda snaps.

"But he was disowned also," Percy says, confused. Tonks had mentioned that Sirius had visited the Tonks household twice, if he is remembering correctly. What had transpired between the two cousins to ensure that they did not speak, even though they were now openly on the same side?

"I abandoned him," Andromeda says quietly, her voice hoarse with pain buried decades prior. "I believed him to be a traitor, not to his family, but to those he loved. It should have been obvious he was not; to be struck from the lineage is not a frivolous matter. For me to believe he would choose his friends over his family and then betray those same friends not five years later...I should have known Sirius would not abandon his honour. I cannot see him, not like this.”

Percy feels acutely as though Andromeda would not welcome his interference. But equally so, Percy knows about doubt—about being doubted, and while he may have told himself sternly that he would turn away any of his siblings who came to him, in truth he would have

welcomed any of their presences in his life. "He is very ill," Percy says quietly. "He has still not awoken."

A faint tremor laces her words. "He sleeps still?"

"Bellatrix cursed him," Percy says delicately. "I think if there is any chance you may be able to help him live, you should take the opportunity. I believe Dumbledore would give you the secret if you asked. I would tell you it myself, but I do not have much sway in the group, not when my inclusion is so new."

He hopes that by framing it as such, she won't take his inference as condescending. She nods once, briskly, and then there is nothing much more to say.

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Cedric, Tonks, and Percy walk into a bar.

To be accurate, Cedric is already *at* the bar, a somewhat seedy looking joint in the Alley squashed between Knockturn and Diagon, looking a bit uncomfortable around all of the rough looking wizards in cloaks. Percy notices him immediately when he walks in himself—perhaps his aura of genuine *goodness*, so annoyingly inculcated in the Hufflepuff prefects each year, and for Cedric likely perfected in his dual tenure as Hogwarts Head Boy and Hogwarts Champion, is what stands out among the rest of the inhabitants of the bar—and takes the long way round to get to him, changing his appearance yet again, turning his hair this time to black.

"How're the Cannons?" Percy asks when he sits, the phrase they'd agreed upon during the last meeting to exchange verification of their identities.

Cedric starts at Percy's unfamiliar face, hidden under self-Transfiguration, and belatedly responds, "Well, outlook isn't the best, but I have hope."

Tonks arrives shortly after. *She* looks more different than expected, sporting a jaunty brown bob and a hard-set jaw. Still, Percy is familiar with her magical signature after that awful year with the Tournament, and anyway when she slides into the booth she knocks purposefully against his shins, which will undoubtedly leave a bruise he'll have to remember to heal.

"What are you doing here?" Percy asks her, glaring over the table at Cedric, whom he'd thought would have the sense not to share their plans for a clandestine meeting.

"Moody sent me," says Tonks casually, after raising a privacy ward of her own to float on top of Cedric's and Percy's.

"*Moody* told you?"

"He said he wasn't bloody likely going to babysit you, and he thought you were a bit soft on me, so he thought I might have a better chance of learning what you're *really* up to," says Tonks unabashedly, taking the full tankard in front of Cedric and stealing a swig. She wrinkles her nose. "Next time, I'm picking the bar."

Percy settles back in his seat, scowling. "Glad to hear Moody thinks so little of me," he snaps back. "I'm not sure what annoys me more; that he lost no sleep over informing you of my secret immediately, that he didn't want to meet me himself, or that he thought I was idiotic enough to *blab* just because you're a pretty girl."

Cedric is quiet, his eyes wide, watching as Tonks and Percy sharpen their claws on each other.

Tonks smiles her unfamiliar smile at him, though he recognises her in the glint of her teeth. "Is it the bob that does it for you, or the blue eyes?"

Percy rolls his eyes. "Definitely not the blue eyes, since half my family has them," he grumbles. "Why don't you buy me a drink? Nothing disgusting, if you think you can manage that."

"So it's the bob, then," replies Tonks. "I'll remember that." She manages to kick him again on her way out of the booth, though he figures this one may have been a genuine accident.

Percy presses two fingers to the bridge of his nose. When he removes them, he sees Cedric watching him curiously. "*What?"*

"Nothing," says Cedric, a crinkle of a laugh in his own blue eyes. "Just wondering if you *are* a bit soft on her."

Percy gives this the disdainful look it deserves. "Well, I'm pretty sure she's practically engaged to Lupin, so it doesn't matter either way."

"To *Professor Lupin?"* Cedric repeats, appropriately scandalized. "Why, he's ancient!"

"Who is?" Tonks asks, sliding back with two frothy mugs. Percy gives his a dubious sip and then immediately gags. He shouldn't have asked her to get him something *not disgusting,* given he'd bet the Philosopher's Stone she chose the worst one on purpose.

"Your boyfriend," Percy says nastily, though he has to admit he's so *relieved* to see Tonks again, to hear her cheerfully teasing him, to see evidence that her magic is working well. And he's relieved Moody told her, since Percy was hardly going to do it himself.

"Remus is not ancient," says Tonks, laughing instead of taking offense. "He's thirty five. A perfectly normal age, and I would remind you all that despite my good looks I'm older than you both."

"So you are engaged to Professor Lupin?"

Tonks frowns. "Engaged? Not hardly. We've only been dating a few weeks. What with Sirius still down with the curse, Remus has been out of his mind with worry."

Perhaps Tonks had had an *accidental* pregnancy, which warranted the marriage. Percy does some quick sums in his head but can't figure, given he wasn't invited nor informed of their wedding. But it seems rather uncharacteristic of Tonks to accidentally get pregnant. In fact he can't wrap his mind around her performing the requisite acts at all, least of all with *Professor Lupin,* who despite being the same age as Severus feels to Percy several years older.

He clears his throat uncomfortably and looks to Cedric. "So is this why you called me here? To gossip about our love lives?"

Cedric smiles winsomely at Percy. "Yes, actually." At Percy's obvious shock, he hastens to continue. "McGonagall gave me the idea. She pointed out that she was going to work closely with you as a…well, not a professor, but certainly someone more professional. Least, to work together with you to implement some of the ideas you had for the Order." Some of his grace disappears as he flumbles through this explanation, his cheeks growing red. Percy is reminded that Cedric is just one year older than Fred and George, and therefore not even to twenty. "Anyway, she said that you would likely work with Moody for the Ministry, since she said you thought it likely the Death Eaters would try and target some Ministry individuals. But apparently Professor Snape asked for my involvement specifically, and Professor McGonagall told me that my task—our task—is to remind you of your age and your anchor. That's the phrase she used."

"Of my age," repeats Percy, his voice laden with skepticism.

Tonks snorts. "To remind you that you're human, you idiot," she cuts in, relieving Cedric of his burden. "To laugh with you and listen to you complain about your boss, even if your boss is a Death Eater. To be your *friends."*

For one terrible second, Percy is eleven years old, and Professor McGonagall is telling him that he needs to *socialise*, and all but bullying him into joining the Chess Club or the Painting Club or making at least one friend. For that one second, a surge of embarrassed resentment flickers inside him, and he wants to knock over his tankard of disgusting frothy beer and storm out of there.

Then he sees Cedric and his terrible earnest eyes, and he feels Tonks press her foot against his understandingly, and he remembers how bloody alone he felt all of last year.

Percy *is* a Gryffindor, even if he forgets it sometimes and everyone else often doubts him, so he exhales a deep breath and sends his anger away to fly out of the open door and dissipate into the night. *It's not a weakness to want company,* he tells himself sternly. Even Tom enjoys when Percy is there, and even Severus seems to value Percy's company, if only nominally. And McGonagall had been hurt when Percy hadn't confided in her, and Myrtle had said she'd missed him, and Landon had invited him over to say goodbye. Maybe he has learned something in this timeline, and this is McGonagall's way of reminding him.

"Thanks," is all he can manage, but Cedric and Tonks seem to understand, and launch gaily into a discussion of how many years post graduation one could date a former professor, and whether the semantic detail of Tonks not having Lupin directly negates some of the oddity of dating someone who used to grade their essays.

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It is astonishing how quickly life changes in the Wizarding World. It is as if a lamp has been extinguished; seemingly overnight, people begin hiding inside, fleeing the country, withdrawing their valuables *en masse* from Gringotts, and stockpiling on food. Some people purchase reasonable provisions: wizarding tents, preserving hampers, medical supplies. But the vast majority seem to believe that if they stay inside their homes and turn out their lights, the Dark Lord's growing army will simply believe they are not home.

Severus fixes the date of his introduction to the Dark Lord for August 31st, the day before Draco will return to Hogwarts. Percy practises his Occlumency obsessively, constructing false memories, hiding damning ones, and bolstering his shields.

(The secondary portrait is finished. Not his best work, but Tom practises stepping into it. It will do).

Scrimgeour spends most of August warring with Dumbledore in a futile attempt to convince the Headmaster to coordinate their attack on the Dark Lord. Percy feels a bit of pity for Scrimgeour; he is truly trying his best, a rare type of politician that is willing to put his life on the line for his duty, and Dumbledore stonewalls him completely without providing any sort of explanation as to why. He won't let Aurors patrol the school, he won't let the Ministry update the wards around the guards, and he flatly denies Scrimgeor's attempts to pry into what Dumbledore may know about Tom. Percy supposes Dumbledore feels he is justified in his mistrust of the Ministry—Voldemort takes it over nearly entirely within a year—but the majority of people continuing to work at present are good, honest wizards, and with Dumbledore's help they may have prevented the coup that is still to come.

More than once, Scrimgeour paces up and down the office, ranting to Percy about Harry Potter, much like his predecessor did, but while Fudge wanted Harry to give up his power, Scimgeour wants him to flaunt it. "If he is the Chosen One, then we need him to reassure the public!" Scrimgeour says often. "He needs to be trained! He needs to be protected!"

August seems like it would be such a long month, but it passes in a blink of an eye. The night before his re-introduction to the Dark Lord passes in a heartbeat. Severus spends nearly an hour attacking Percy's mental wards, and then only reluctantly pronounces him ready.

"You must be prepared for him to Mark you," Severus warns him for what must be the tenth time. "He may not trust your circlet. In fact, I still believe it folly to dare present it to him. He will view it as arrogance."

"I think it is worth the risk for me to try."

"And Tom?"

Percy bites his lip and then says in a rush, "I believe he has enough magic to make a vow."

"*Percy*—"

"We can at least see if he would make the vow," Percy says hurriedly, ignoring for the moment that in his outrage, Severus said his first name. Percy thinks he can count on one hand the number of times that Severus let that accident occur.

"This is an unnecessary risk, and you know it," Severus says heatedly. "We have a war to win, Weasley. We cannot win it if you and I are dead. Not to mention that we both know perfectly well that no vow is airtight, nor are they particularly effective at saving lives."

The layers of meaning behind this comment make Percy wince, but he steadfastly ignores them. "If Tom baulks at making the vow, we definitely know we cannot trust him," Percy points out. "I believe it is worth a try."

"I will construct the vow," Severus orders tiredly. "And only then will I assess whether it is sufficient."

The vow they agree upon is this:

I swear on my magic and my soul not to betray the true intentions of Percy Weasley and Severus Snape to any person or creature, including any other Horcruxes, shades, or manifestations of myself and/or Tom Riddle and/or Voldemort and/or the Dark Lord. I swear I will cooperate fully with Percy Weasley and Severus Snape to destroy the part of Tom Riddle that calls himself Voldemort. I swear I will not conceal information or otherwise mislead Percy Weasley and Severus Snape in any manner or for any reason.

"He might want us to take the same vow," Percy points out. "And we cannot agree to the last."

*"*If he wants us to take the vow then we do not indulge his desire to speak to the Dark Lord," says Severus coolly.

When they present this idea to Tom that night, Percy watches carefully and he sees a hint of resentment flit across Tom's face before it is carefully concealed. "An understandable precaution," Tom says, his voice smooth as butter melting on a warm day. "I will make this vow with the addition that our agreement ends the moment the Dark Lord is destroyed."

"Planning on betraying us, are you?" Severus inquires acerbically.

Tom is not fazed. "I intend to step back into my identity," he says calmly. "I will not spend the rest of my life obliged to report on my behaviour to two other wizards. I assume you would not do the same."

Percy glances at Severus, whose lined face is unreadable. He stares at Tom for a long moment and then says abruptly, "Weasley is too soft to threaten you, so I will. We know how to destroy Horcruxes. We may not know what the others are, but we know you are one. If I receive any sort of hint that you have betrayed us in any way, I will immediately destroy the portrait and tell Albus Dumbledore what I know of your other Horcruxes."

“And here I thought you were an ally,” snaps Tom, as if he were not phased to be threatened.

“I was,” Severus says, and the expression on his face abruptly turns to one of *longing*, if Percy had to put a name on it. “I am an ally of the Tom Riddle I once knew. I have said before that I would have followed him to the world beyond this, and that is still true. But I am not convinced that you are worthy of his name, and I am certain that the man calling himself the Dark Lord is but a pale imitation of what he once was.”

Percy feels a frisson of irritation as Tom looks steadily at Severus, as if they are the only two men in the world. Then Tom nods, and Percy lets out a breath he had not known he was holding. “I will be that man again,” Tom promises softly. “I swear this to you for free.”

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The next night, Severus Apparates them both to Malfoy Manor. Though all three have practised in detail what they plan to say, still Percy stumbles when he arrives, a haze of panic penetrating his shields when he catches sight of the familiar facade of the Manor, the white peacocks like sharp shards of ice against the dark stone.

“You prepared a will, did you not?” Severus says quietly in his ear.

Percy swallows and nods. He’s had a will in Gringotts since he’d turned seventeen.

“Then do not fear. Even if you die today, I will finish your task.”

This, for some reason, comforts him, and he’s able to take in several deep breaths and feel his heart return to its normal cadence. “Let us go.”

The walk through the Manor is the same: dark, foreboding, quiet. The Dark Lord’s magic feels more omnipresent, if that is even possible, filling the entire house with a dark, heavy mist. Again, Percy hears his own voice echo in his ears, as if the Dark Lord were welcoming him personally into his lair.

When they step into the ballroom, Percy wants to gulp, though he strives to keep his face even. There are nearly fifty Death Eaters present, most if not all wearing the robes and the mask, arranged in an even semi-circle around the throne. The Dark Lord is wearing black robes again, but finer black robes. Percy, who has spent years evaluating people’s robes as they pass him to mentally compare his own against their perceived wealth, can tell they are expensive.

Four chandeliers blaze above them, casting cool white light across the cavernous space. Their shadows twist and writhe, appearing as snakes, and then back as slivers of darkness, patterning the sleek wooden floor with an eerie rhythmic dance. Percy wonders faintly, nearly hysterically, whether the Dark Lord decorated for his Marking ceremony, or whether he has been slowly redecorating day by day, driven to boredom inside his oppressive castle.

Focus, Percy tells himself roughly, dropping to his knees besides Snape, the package floating next to him.

"You may rise," the Dark Lord whispers in his high, thin voice. Percy sets the wrapped portrait down—he notices the Dark Lord glancing at it—and then straightens. “I am pleased to see you back, little Weasley. Some did not believe you would return.”

“Their doubt allows me the opportunity to confound their expectations, my Lord,” Percy says, bowing his head. “I would not miss the chance to meet with you for any reason.”

“You may be a Gryffindor but your tongue is silver,” the Dark Lord hisses amusedly, his voice lingering on the resonant s sounds in his speech. “Have you brought me a gift?”

Percy wets his lips and then glances at the portrait, bound in brown paper. “I have something for your private attention, my Lord,” he says cautiously. “From our earlier acquaintance.”

Voldemort’s nostrils flare. He enters Percy’s mind, but Percy is ready, and shows an image of him and Tom in the Chamber, as if Tom had just been on his mind.

Voldemort narrows his snake-like eyes at Percy and then looks around at the assembled Death Eaters, all watching the interaction curiously. “Out,” he orders, and distantly Percy feels a frisson of admiration at the way that the one command is sufficient to clear the room of dozens of haughty purebloods. Severus does not move, still standing mutely next to Percy.

“If this is a weapon, you will be punished,” says Voldemort, as if it were an afterthought.

“If I dared to bring you a weapon, I would deserve my punishment, my Lord,” Percy says. He flicks his wand at the portrait and the brown paper tears itself away, revealing the portrait.

Tom smiles up at Voldemort. “Hello,” he says.

For a frozen second there is silence—and then Voldemort stands, the throne screeching harshly against the stone floor, and Percy finds himself on the floor, screaming in agony.

The Cruciatus he had been subjected to before, he realizes in a very distant corner of his brain, had been par for the course, a Cruciatus meant only to make Percy aware of the pain that Voldemort could damage. This Cruciatus, driven clearly by Voldemort’s panicked rage, is the kind of spell that could easily drive a man mad, and Percy’s only coherent thought is that he hopes it drives him mad soon.

“I quite like Percy,” Tom says archly. Percy hears his voice as if from very far away and comes to realise in the next second that he is screaming Tom’s name. “I'd thank you not to damage him.”

With a start, the spell ends, and Percy sobs quietly on the floor, his body aching all over, feeling as if he’d been rolled flat and stretched over the gleaming wood.

“Explain this,” Voldemort hisses.

Percy has the presence of mind to stay quiet. They had agreed that Tom would be the one to handle Voldemort, and anyway, Percy can hardly say his own name, let alone tangle with Voldemort. But though he gasps for air on the floor, Percy cannot help but watch, fascinated, as two parts of a wizard's soul converse as if they are different people, rather than two sides of the same coin.

"I am the diary," Tom says. "We intended to sacrifice a victim so that I may return to my form, but we were unable due to Dumbledore's interference." He and Voldemort sneer the exact same way, mouth pursed to the left, forehead furrowed, nose—or in Voldemort's case, nose slits—scrunched identically. This distracts Percy sufficiently from the fading pain, and he is able to push himself back on his knees, though he sways precariously. "Dumbledore found me and kept me in his office, and Severus was able to replace it with a replicate. Percy here had the idea to use what he'd learned about portraiture, which you can thank Lady Malfoy for in her patronage of him."

"You are not sixteen," Voldemort says, staring at Tom as if transfixed.

"The portrait aged after Percy completed the ritual we agreed upon," Tom says, as they had planned, flexing his fingers and looking at them curiously. "I believe some of my life force was used."

"And I am supposed to believe this is real?" Voldemort says with a high, cruel laugh that nevertheless does not mask his uncertainty, nor the way he continues to track Tom with a hungry gaze.

Tom smirks. "I am you," he says. "We are the same."

"Prove it," says Voldemort, just as Tom had said he would.

Tom says something in Latin that Percy does not understand, but it makes Voldemort's eyes widen and his nose flare furiously. Seemingly without thinking about it, Voldemort steps back and falls heavily into his throne, looking more human than Percy had ever imagined.

"And the others?"

"Safe," Tom says. "I can sense them. Can't you?"

"Of course," Voldemort says, too quickly. Percy has to prevent himself forcibly from glancing at Severus. So Voldemort cannot sense them. That explains much.

"Dumbledore is looking for them," Tom says darkly, and again he and Voldemort make the same involuntary expression at Dumbledore's name. "We cannot go to them."

"You did not tell me this," says Voldemort, turning on Severus.

Again, Tom speaks, and again, Voldemort's attention snaps entirely to Tom. "Dumbledore has told only his phoenix. He does not trust Severus fully; he thinks that Severus' hatred for the Potter boy blinds him to all else. But I was there, and I listened."

Percy takes this moment to speak up. They agreed to fudge the timeline, such that the diary was in Dumbledore's office for an unspecified time before Percy had the idea to ask Severus to steal it back. Still, Percy hopes to distract Voldemort so he does not look too deeply into their story. "I brought him for you, my Lord, as a show of good faith."

"But you understand I will kill you," Voldemort says, reaching for your wand. Percy gulps, reminded of Severus drawing his wand on him in the Room of Requirement.

"He is under my protection," Tom snaps, and as if hypnotised, Voldemort drops his wand. It is utterly fascinating; Voldemort looks like nothing more than a recalcitrant schoolboy, despite his undeniable power, the way his Dark magic snakes heavily through the room, how small and artificial Tom should be in comparison. But it is Tom who seems larger than life, who commands the attention of three wizards, even from within his frame. "He will be a Death Eater, and he will serve us loyally."

Voldemort and Tom stare at each other like enemies sizing each up for a fight. Then Voldemort hisses something, abruptly, the unfamiliar sound of Parseltongue eerie and odd. Tom smirks and hisses back, and for several long minutes it is as if nobody else is in the room.

Then Voldemort nods, just once. "You will not speak of this to anyone," he orders Percy, and Percy nods obediently. Voldemort snaps his fingers, and Tom disappears from sight, presumably secreted away to whatever passes for Voldemort's quarters. Percy tenses; he can only hope, now, that Tom's word is sufficient, that he will return to Percy's flat, that Percy did not just damn them all.

Without Tom, Voldemort once again looms large. His magic snakes out from around him, as if unshackled once Tom had been properly tucked away. Percy gags on the taste of it, his breath tightening, his body aching with the remembered pain of the Cruciatus.

"You may have his trust, but you do not yet have mine," Voldemort says darkly to Percy. "You will serve, and you will serve loyally. Your loyalty is to me, not to him, do you understand?"

"Yes, my Lord," says Percy, though in the back of his mind he marvels that Voldemort does not say *we*.

Voldemort summons the Death Eaters back, and despite their curious looks, he does not address whatever gift it was that Percy brought. Instead, he straightens on his large, ornate throne and snaps his fingers rudely at Severus. "Bring in your godson."

Percy remains kneeling, his joints beginning to ache, as Draco Malfoy is led into the room. He drops to his knees besides Percy but does not look at him.

"My Lord," Draco says quietly but steadily.

"Draco," Voldemort hisses, elongating the name and rolling it in his mouth as if to savour the sound. "You are to be my youngest follower."

Draco shifts nervously—Percy can feel the heat radiating off his body—but says only, "It would be an honour to serve you, my Lord."

"Pretty words from a pretty boy," the Dark Lord croons, though Percy feels like he can tell that the Dark Lord is rattled, going through the motions of this ceremony for show rather than with full intent. But it is too late to think about whether presenting Voldemort with Tom was a mistake. "You will make me proud, won't you, Draco? Not like your failure of a father."

The insult lands like a weapon in the tense stillness of the room. Percy can only imagine the look on Lucius Malfoy's face had he been able to hear the insult from Azkaban.

Draco swallows; Percy can hear the way his throat convulses before he responds. "Yes, my Lord."

"We will begin," Voldemort says lightly, and then Percy is on the floor, screaming in agony, as the Cruciatus tears through his body like a million sharp needles, like Fiendyre, like ice, like lashes of a whip, like nails tearing through his flesh. It grips his magic tightly in its invisible grasp and squeezes. Vaguely, Percy is aware that he is screaming, but nothing, not even the Draught of Despair, has ever come within the same universe of what he feels how. He would kill someone, kill himself, give up the magic which now causes him so much agony, for the chance to take just one breath without this pain…

...and with a rush, his prayers are answered, and he comes back to reality in a flash, his mind full of cotton, his limbs weak and trembling. He does not think he can take another one of these.

The Dark Lord is laughing. "It's your first Cruciatus, isn't it," he says delightedly, as if he had not just cursed Percy minutes before, and again at their first introduction at the beginning of the summer. Jeering laughter from the others; Percy feels like he is in a dream.

Draco begins to scream and Percy flinches away from the sound automatically, resting his sweaty forehead on the cool floors, unable to look at Draco, or even up at the ceiling. It ends so quickly—had he really been under the curse for less than a minute?—and he hears the faintest sound of Draco sobbing.

"So you feel pain," Voldemort says philosophically. "So you understand that to be weak is to feel pain. Rise, Percival Weasley."

He pushes himself up unsteadily, reaching deep inside him for the strength to force his resisting body to obey.

"You have felt weak your whole life," Voldemort whispers, and despite the echoing ballroom and the dozens of Death Eaters behind, Percy suddenly feels like Voldemort is speaking only to him. "You have been ignored and overlooked. You have been taken advantage of and exploited. You have been held back and told to do no harm. Well, little Weasley, that ends today."

Percy holds the Dark Lord's red gaze for a long, frozen second, his mind entirely blank with fear and trembling and something that feels oddly like justification.

"Yes," the Dark Lord continues. "You will become one of mine, and I will lift to heights you would never otherwise see." Percy nods as if hypnotised, not missing the way that the wizard said *mine*.

He snaps his fingers and the doors behind Percy open. Percy does not turn—he cannot seem to keep his eyes off Voldemort—but he registers the sound of panicked breathing.

"Take control of your life, Percival Weasley," Voldemort whispers, and suddenly Percy becomes aware that he's seen speaking silently in his mind the entire time. "Kill him, and never be ordinary again."

Percy turns in a daze, his movements sluggish, as if the Dark Lord is controlling his every movement. A man, a young man, a Muggle judging by the style of his clothes, lays panting and bloody on the floor in front of Percy.

Severus had warned him about this. Each Death Eater must perform a feat of Dark magic, both to prove themselves and to expose themselves to judgement if they were ever to defect. Bound by the secret of their silent depravity, many remained in the ranks as to not reveal that, while hooded, they tortured and murdered and raped and stole.

Most merely had to cast a Dark curse. Some even chose to use a family artefact to do their work for them.

"He will expect you to do something good," Severus had warned him. "Something no lackey of Dumbledore would have the guts to do. Choose something powerful."

Percy had planned on Imperius, or perhaps the Cruciatus—but he feels so angry, suddenly, in this house of horrors, sacrificing his soul because Dumbledore couldn't trust anyone enough to reveal the secrets of the Horcruxes, because his entire family believed so blindly in Dumbledore's truth that they died for it, because Harry Potter was nothing more than a boy, and half the Wizarding World would be scarred by the time that he manages to mature enough to face his destiny. This Muggle is dead, whether by Percy’s wand or Voldemort’s, and Percy is going to make his death count.

Percy levels his wand at the pleading Muggle and bites out a curse.

At first, nothing happens, and Percy hears a few doubtful whispers, and even one derisive snort, as the Muggle continues to sob and plead. Then, his pleas stop abruptly, as if someone had cast a silencing charm.

"You will never be one of us," Percy says coldly, looking down at the man, who must die so that Percy can live. "But you can see what you lack, before you die."

The man begins to scream. The whispers behind Percy break out into muttering as the man's skin turns translucent. His veins are visible, his blood circulating furiously, and as Percy watches each vein begins to turn gold, sparking with magic.

"Stop this, please!" The man gasps out as the magic builds and spreads inside his body, tearing through his organs, causing gashes to appear on his arms and legs, diseased and

blackened blood spilling out slowly. "Please—"

His veins pulse and his scream is caught in a throat that will never work again, as the magic, failing to find a magical core to anchor on, turns to extracting any remnants of power from the rest of the body. One by one his organs disappear inside his still-transparent body; his veins slither inward like ropes pulled by a boat and then disappear; and then the rest of his body bursts into flames, crumbling into ash, sending a large pulse of heat into the air as the magic, spurned, lashes out.

There is silence, then, and Percy stares fixedly at the pile of ash, feeling acutely that he will remember this in his nightmares, but the only emotion he can summon now is satisfaction. In this way he supposes that to kill a Muggle is no different than a wizard, not when Percy's mind is so full of what needs to be done that there is no room for anything else.

The silence is broken by Voldemort, once again giving a bark of pleased laughter. "I see now why Severus thought you worthy of my notice," he says, and the warmth of his approval falls over Percy like a cloak. "Where did you learn that spell?"

Percy had learned it from the book that Lucius had left with him, buried in the back and labelled for *those who dare to challenge us.*

"I seek knowledge, my Lord," Percy says, his voice even and his face calm and impassive. The death had been horrific, but it had been impressive, and he *will* impress the Dark Lord if that is what he needs to do to win the war.

Voldemort gives him one more appraising glance before turning to Draco. Draco, his voice shaky, manages only an Imperio, and the palpable difference in the energy of the room is striking as the Death Eaters all watch the Muggle woman take a knife and slit her own hand.

"Acceptable for a child," Voldemort finally pronounces, sending a green curse out of his wand almost as an afterthought. "We will make you a man soon, Draco. Now, my friends, you have experienced what it is to be weak; and you have felt what it is to be strong. What awaits you now is to feel what it is to be loyal."

For the third part of the ceremony, Percy and Draco both kneel, and obediently recite aloud the vows that Voldemort feeds them line by line. These are exactly the same as the ones Severus had given him in advance; and, just like Severus had said, they are not binding. It baffles Percy. To go through all of this trouble, to create a fascinating display of magic, and then to not make the vows magically binding? What kind of hubris would it require for Voldemort to assume nobody will cross him?

"Now you will be Marked," Voldemort pronounces grandly, "And join our knighthood forever."

Percy tenses, but Severus clears his throat and steps forward from where he had been observing in silence. "My Lord," he says carefully. "May I raise a suggestion?"

Percy gets the distinct impression that if anyone else would have interfered at that exact moment, they would have been cut down instantly with a Cruciatus. But Voldemort merely

looks irritated, or whatever passes for it on his strange, reptilian face, and gives Severus a short nod.

"Dumbledore has significantly increased security at the school," Severus says smoothly. "He plans to search all luggage, all mail, and even the students themselves. Scrimgeour will surely follow suit. I believe it may be prudent to delay Marking Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy until both obstacles have been removed."

Voldemort nods thoughtfully. "And I suppose you will have me take their word they will not betray me to Dumbledore?"

Percy senses his opportunity and crawls forward. "My Lord, I foresaw this problem and sought to solve it. I know I could not hope to replicate the incredible magic of the Mark you created—but I did my best to create something worthy of your attention."

He reaches slowly into his pocket and withdraws the small silver arm band he'd designed. He had finally decided against rings; too conspicuous by half. This slides up a wizard's arm and tightens on their biceps, thereby escaping notice for those searching for a mark on a forearm.

Voldemort takes it without comment. He begins to examine it, allowing it to float in front of him, casting a quick flurry of spells that even Percy cannot follow. The seconds stretch on as he focuses all of his attention on the slim band. Percy risks another look at Snape, whose face is impassive.

Finally, Voldemort casts one final spell on the circlet and looks up to once again meet Percy's gaze. "You studied a Dark Mark."

"Mine, my Lord," says Severus, once again inserting himself neatly to take the attention off of Percy.

"You knew of this plan?"

"I think it...more prudent to delay Marking for a year," Severus says delicately. "Much will be different in a year's time, if certain…tasks are completed as assigned. Draco will be at Hogwarts, and I can invent an excuse to meet with Weasley. If either were to...stray, they can be disposed of easily."

Voldemort nods, looking thoughtful, and then to Percy's surprise he twists his wand in a figure-eight and the band begins to thrum. Percy takes an involuntary step forward, but Voldemort only cackles and directs it to Draco, who takes it with a nervous glance to Percy.

“The boy will not betray me,” Voldemort says confidently, “Not while his mother sleeps in the same house as I reside, not while his father is alive only by my grace. No, Draco, you will not betray me, not while you plan to kill Albus Dumbledore.”

Draco inhales sharply as his task becomes known to him. The Death Eaters behind murmur at this; it is clear to all that his task is a punishment, rather than a reward, but Draco straightens and thanks the Dark Lord with the perfect manners of a pureblood heir.

“You, on the other hand, cannot be trusted, not until you prove yourself worthy,” the Dark Lord says to Percy, who cringes. Perhaps had he not introduced Tom, he would have had a chance at getting away without a Mark. But of course the Dark Lord will want him Marked, if only to prove Percy is his and not Tom’s. “Present me your forearm.”

Percy gulps. He wants to seek reassurance in Snape’s dark eyes, but he does not risk looking away. Instead he stumbles forward and presents his left forearm. Voldemort slashes his wand and Percy’s robes split, revealing his bare arm. Wildly, Percy thinks to himself that he'll need to buy another set of robes, though of course if he dies it's a moot point to consider.

The Dark Lord is impossibly close to him. Percy can smell the strange rotten sweet musk that hangs around him, the physical embodiment of his sickened magic, and hear the hoarse sound of his breathing. Up close, he sees that the man’s skin is truly like skin, with small pores and an unhealthy pale cast, but that his red eyes flash like a monster’s. His breath is like ice.

The touch of the Dark Lord’s wand on his skin burns like an icicle left too long. Percy cries out despite himself. The Dark Lord laughs. “You will never betray me,” he says very quietly. “You will serve me first and not *him*. Your task will come in time, but it will not be easy. I would not want to *underestimate* such a *promising* young wizard.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Percy gasps out. In the blurry, muddled way that his thoughts are running together, he wonders what Tom said to the Dark Lord about him, and whether having Tom's acclaim will be better or worse for him.

“*Mosmorde*,” the Dark Lord says, almost lovingly, and for an eternity Percy feels his magic melding with Voldemort’s. It feels like when Tom possessed him, like when his soul layered on top of Tom’s as they lurched fixedly toward the diadem. His chest is full and tight and he cannot breath, cannot scream out, his body flushing warm and then cold as Voldemort’s magic snakes over his skin, a weaker imitation of the spell Percy had just cast on the Muggle.

Then with a terrible burn he feels the Mark brand him, his skin burning, the flesh burning, the Mark burning, and this time he does scream as the dark snake erupts and hisses menacingly over his skin. He no longer thinks the design is a bit stupid; every centimeter of the tattoo prickles with power, with that same oily film that coats the back of Percy’s teeth when he is in the presence of the Dark Lord.

“You are mine, now,” says Voldemort, and Percy knows that despite everything that statement is true.

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That night, the portrait in his room remains empty.

DECEPTION (2/4)

Chapter Notes

> As a reminder, the underlined words are Severus and the italics are Percy. Please let me know if this is too confusing.
>
> Thank you to all of you for your continued support! It continues to blow my mind that anyone is actually reading this, let alone enjoying it and commenting.

CHAPTER TEN: DECEPTION (2/4)

1996 — 1997 (Percy is 20 & 33, Severus is 35, Harry is 16, and Dumbledore has one year left to live)

September 1996

Percy impassively observes as each student's luggage is taken apart, examined, and assembled again. Each student displays his bare arms and submits to a check by McGonagall before being turned over to take the carriages to the school. The process is lengthy, even with the aid of the Aurors that Scrimgeour pointedly sent with Percy to assist.

Draco gives Percy a long, unreadable look when it is his turn. His luggage is, of course, pristine, and his arm perfectly bare. Percy cannot see the circlet on his arm, but his own Mark —still raw, still smarting, still alien, still branded into his flesh—gives a little jump in recognition. Percy flinches violently and has to compose his face when Julian, his assistant, looks at him in askance. Draco’s nostrils flare just slightly, suggesting that whatever magic Voldemort added to Percy’s circlet felt the proximity to another Death Eater as well, but he is far better at hiding the effects of the magic. The Auror examining Draco gives a little hiss in disappointment but waves him on. McGonagall's face is perfectly neutral as she turns to check Pansy Parkinson's arm.

Percy waves on Theodore Nott and watches Draco go, climbing delicately into the carriage with all the good breeding of a pureblood heir. If the fact that the carriages are now pulled by Thestrals bothers Draco, he does not show it. Assuming that Draco made it to sixteen without seeing someone die, Percy supposes, which is an unpleasant thought. Next is—Percy checks his list—Blaise Zabini, who came to Hogwarts with four large trunks and a haughty attitude. Percy waves him on as well when he reluctantly submits to the check, turning his attention to Draco, whose pale face can still be glimpsed through the carriage windows as he waits for his friends to join him. Sixteen years old and with an impossible task. It occurs to Percy suddenly that the Wizarding World is not particularly kind to sixteen year olds; Tom, Draco, Harry,

Myrtle. Ginny will have a difficult sixth year soon, if Percy does not act quickly. Perhaps the magic senses that at sixteen a wizard is nearly to his majority, and thus enacts a price.

Despite the exhaustion that Percy knows Draco must be feeling—exhaustion twin to Percy's own—Draco looks perfectly composed, his head held high as the crowd of young, wealthy Slytherins move quickly to jostle for a spot next to their prince. Draco looks far more the heir of Slytherin even than Tom, shorter and darker and skinnier. That makes Percy worry for him; it may be Voldemort's old fondness for Abraxas that keeps him from harming Draco, but if Draco were to appear a threat, Tom wouldn't hesitate for a second.

The adrenaline from the night has worn off, and though Percy struggled to sleep, he feels surprisingly calm now that it is day. Or perhaps *empty* is the better word, rather than *calm*. The Dark Mark throbs hotly on his skin, and he finds himself touching it through his robes, feeling a dual urge both to stare at it for hours, and also to pretend it does not exist. He's a Death Eater now—but in a way he's been acting under the same deception for years, and while Voldemort is undeniably powerful, what Percy realised last night watching him interact with Tom is that he can be a man like any other. He is no monster; merely a murderer, and Percy has already faced off with two parts of his soul.

After all of the students have been checked, and McGonagall dispatched to intercept the crowd of jittery first years that passed by like a cloud of mites hovering around Hagrid's large frame, Robards barks at the group of Aurors to spread out and check the wards on the edges of the grounds. That had not been agreed upon, but Percy had been expecting something of the sort, and likely Dumbledore as well. Percy oversees Julian cleaning up the luggage station and turns to go as well, casting one wistful look at Hogwarts. Even to be this close to its cheery warmth is comfortable, despite the chilly wind sweeping over the grounds.

But before Percy can leave, Harry stumbles up the path, led by Tonks, who is looking tired and glum. Percy hasn't been able to talk to her for weeks, but he suspects her depressed demeanour is due both to the pressure of Lupin volunteering for the futile effort of liasoning with the werewolves—futile, he reminds himself in an attempt to be kinder to Lupin, because Percy published a bloody report detailing precisely how the Death Eaters should win their allegiance—and the fact that Sirius Black has still not awoken, according to Severus. Whatever curse Bellatrix left for him as her parting gift seems to dodge even Dumbledore's considerable healing powers.

Harry looks glum too, and he's sporting a nasty bruise on his face. The consolation that Percy's actions spared Black's life is not particularly strong, given that for all intents and purposes the man may as well be dead and will probably die if they do not cure him soon. Harry and the rest spent the summer at Grimmauld Place, but Percy, despite his new invitation to the Order, has still not worked up the courage to Apparate inside.

"Found him on the train," Tonks reports to Robards obediently. "Another student hexed him."

"I'll walk him to the castle," Percy volunteers. Tonks gives him a cold look and very pointedly continues shouldering Harry, though she does not openly protest when Percy leaves his position at the luggage station—it's so satisfying to be senior, since Percy has a Junior Assistant of his own, and Julian has to step up whenever he raises an eyebrow—and joins her.

When they are out of sight of the Robards, Tonks nudges Harry. “You be safe this year, do you hear?”

"Harry," Percy says quickly, cutting off whatever reply Harry may have had. Seeing Harry alone is a stroke of luck, and allows Percy to set into motion something that he's been thinking of for a few weeks. "I need to talk to you about Sirius. Do you know Tonks' mother?"

Harry's tired gaze flicks between Percy and Tonks. "Um, no," he says, in the tone of someone who does not think about other people's parents.

“Why are you meeting with my mother?” Tonks asks with a groan. "She'll jump at any chance if she thinks you're interested in me. She's not Remus' biggest fan."

"She's Sirius' cousin," Percy explains, ignoring Tonks. Why everyone seems so intent to pair them together is a question for another day. At least Tonks isn't allowing the insinuations to affect her friendship with him. "I think she may be able to help with his curse. I told her to speak to Dumbledore, but I'm not sure if she has. She needs permission to enter, er, the place in London."

"He didn't mention it," Harry says flatly.

"You've seen Dumbledore?" Percy's not seen Dumbledore, although admittedly he's trying hard not to encounter the man.

Harry nods warily. "Yeah. He asked me to help him recruit a new professor. Slughorn."

Percy only vaguely remembers Slughorn, given that the two years in which he taught were the two years where Percy remained as far as possible from Hogwarts.

"Why?" Tonks asks, diverted from her teasing of Percy by her curiosity. "You're no charmer."

Harry flushes. "Slughorn collects people, apparently. Didn't want to come back to Hogwarts until he knew I was Harry Potter." His voice is full of disdain, and quite frankly, Percy cannot blame him.

"Did Dumbledore say why he wanted Slughorn?"

"Well, he needs a new Defence teacher every year," Harry says with a shrug. "Slughorn taught before, I suppose. Can't be worse than Umbridge. Look, I need to go to the castle…"

Percy nods distractedly. "Of course, of course." They set off. Percy stops at the doors and turns again to Harry, unable to let Harry go quite yet. "Listen, Harry. You know as well as I do that...things are going to just get worse from here." He hesitates and then says in a rush, "Keep practising defence, do you hear me?"

Tonks nods seriously. "Don't worry about Sirius, we'll sort him out. Practise your magic, Harry. You know I'm not one to nag—unlike the ponce next to me—but it's true. You lot will all need to know how to defend yourselves."

"Keep the DA going," Percy adds. "Tell Cedric."

Harry looks between them again and then nods roughly before separating himself to attend the feast. Percy watches him with the same trepidation that he watched Draco, though nobody has taught Harry a Glamour charm to mask the exhaustion that spells itself out so clearly on his young face. Percy supposes he wasn't supposed to talk to Harry, given that Harry allegedly *trusts him too much* to pretend otherwise if asked, but Percy doesn't know why Dumbledore would think that. Certainly Ron hasn't liked Percy since he was eleven, and if his own brother doesn't trust him, his brother's best friend is not likely to think otherwise.

Tonks turns to him as if she's going to say something cutting, but then her hair flickers grey and she merely sighs. "I'll try to see you in London, soon," she says tiredly. "Bloody hell."

"Give the werewolf my regards," says Percy, both to see her roll her eyes, and also to remind her that she should not appear too friendly with him.

"I just don't understand why you don't trust Dumbledore," exhales Tonks in a gust of irritation. "It's Dumbledore."

"Do you really think Dumbledore would hesitate to sacrifice you in a second, if doing so served him well?" Percy asks, raising one eyebrow.

Tonks, to her credit, does not immediately protest. "Well, I imagine keeping everyone in the Order alive does serve him well, so I should be safe, yeah?"

"Funny that he hasn't awoken Sirius, nor helped with his curse," Percy points out coolly. "It most definitely would behoove him to have Sirius alive so that Dumbledore is the de facto head of the Order's Headquarters, and Harry won't try anything reckless, not with his precious godfather dependent on Dumbledore. Funny that he doesn't help Draco, even though you and I both know he's not evil, and he's stuck in an incredibly precarious position." Tonks begins to protest, and Percy holds up one hand to forestall her. "Look, Dumbledore is a good man." *Of sorts*, he thinks uncharitably. "I'm not trying to argue that he isn't. But he's the general of his own army, and so he has to make sacrifices according to his battle plans. I have no intention of being one of his soldiers, and the best way for me to keep out of his plans is to keep out of his notice."

Tonks looks at him soberly, and in her gaze Percy sees her mother. Tonks is so young, though she's older, of course, than his physical body is now. He holds his breath, hoping he won't have to strike down one of his only friends.

"I hate this," mumbles Tonks, turning her body half away from him, as if insulted. Percy is sure nobody is close enough to hear anything, and anyway, he's raised the appropriate protections against eavesdropping. But anyone could glimpse their bodies, outlined by the stark moonlight. "All this waiting. If we're truly in a war, we should be fighting battles. But Scrimgeour won't call it that, even though we all know better."

Percy hums noncommittally. "I'll see you soon," he says and walks away from her with brisk, abrupt strides. But her words play on his mind as he makes his way home. Perhaps he's not the only one feeling constrained to act.

And it is true that Scrimgeour, for all his bluster and private indignation at the state of affairs, seems cautious to act. Perhaps he is considering the limited size of the Auror forces, particularly after a raid on the Nott family goes poorly, and two Aurors die in the fight. Perhaps he believes that the work of a Minister is to procure foreign allies and elicit the support of powerful wizards like Dumbledore. Perhaps he has plans he does not share with Percy, which would not surprise Percy too much, given he doesn't think Scrimgeour ever thought very highly of him.

Though Percy does not speak directly to Moody, he can see that Moody is taking action of his own. More than once, Percy stops by the Auror office to see the desks all but deserted, the squads down in the training gym underneath the Ministry drilling in relentless preparation for the raids that are to come. Percy reads the papers every day, but he cannot tell if the losses reported on both sides are higher or lower than they would be without the joint actions of these two men, but despite Percy's nominal inclusion in the Order, things seem to be proceeding right on schedule.

That is, until Percy wakes for the fourth night in the row in the middle of a scream, his throat as raw as if he'd swallowed one of Fred and George's pills and thrown up for hours.

For a long second, Percy sits upright in his bed, wand clutched in his sweaty hand, eyes flicking around the room to look for the enemy his body is convinced is nearby. For a long second, he is torn, half of his mind still in the dream, in the great dark ballroom of Malfoy Manor, the Muggle man in front of him, Percy's spell tearing him to pieces. Except it had been Percy facing himself, his red hair glinting like blood in front of him as the magic swept through his body and took the ultimate price for his arrogance in believing he was anything other than a useless Squib.

(Strangely, oddly, unexpectedly, Percy dreams of the death of the Muggle much more than his murder of Bellatrix Lestrange. The latter had seemed inevitable, excusable, even *admirable.* Certainly both Severus and Tom, the two ends of his moral spectrum, had complimented him on the act).

As Percy manages to wrench his mind away from his nightmare, his heartbeat stuttering oddly against his chest as he realises that he is in his bedroom and he is safe, he feels a tremendous urge to cry.

Despite what Severus had said, Percy had thought that killing a Muggle *would* be easier than killing a wizard. Percy cannot remember the very first chicken he'd ever helped to kill, though he is sure he felt strange about it at the time, perhaps holding its squirming body with trembling hands as his mother aimed her wand at it grimly. Percy didn't lose any sleep over the hordes of gnomes he'd kicked over the fence, abandoning them to forage for shelter outside the protective embrace of the Burrow's lawn. He'd spent years of his childhood catching frogs and fish and snakes, before he'd professed to grow out of it. The mice did not sit heavily on his consciousness, and though he'd returned the cat before trying his hand at it, he does not think he would have endured nightmares over its pitiful cries.

But the Muggle…

Perhaps Percy's fixation on the event was due to how vividly awful it was, the sight of the golden lights flashing through the man's body, only to cluster at the ends of his organs and pull them with vicious force. Perhaps Percy wakes, screaming, feeling that his own skin is on fire because he knows in his heart he had not *had* to kill the Muggle, but rather chose to end his life for his own rewards. But shouldn't his subconscious know that to refuse to kill the Muggle would have certainly been more dangerous than if Percy had ducked his head back under the desk in the Department of Ministries and let Bellatrix kill Tonks and Sirius?

Fine, he thinks to Severus uncharitably, grumpily. *You've made your point.*

Has he? whispers Tom, quietly. Percy shudders and drops his wand, burrowing back in the sweaty tangle of blankets.

Yes.

But even acknowledging that yes, perhaps Muggles are the same as wizards, magic notwithstanding, does little to quell Percy's horror whenever he thinks of the events of that night. Even when his own magic sparks down his skin it makes him shiver, imagining the power that has been at his fingertips for his entire life turning on him viciously. His inclusion in the nightmare is new; Percy has dreamt so often of the Muggle man that he can remember every detail of the man's face, of the strange checked pattern of his shirt, of the round shape of his ears. But to see his own face staring mutely back at him, to see his own body crumble into ash…

He does not get very much sleep the rest of the night.

Perhaps that is what is to blame for what is truly a reckless act.

The next day, after ensuring yet again that most of the Aurors are on another one of Moody's training exercises, Percy makes his way down to the holding cells in the Ministry, an area unpleasantly familiar to him for his time working under Umbridge in the war. Now, before the terrors truly begin, the cells are largely open, creaking intermittently as a gust of wind down the winding cells rattle the bolts in the large metal doors. He holds his breath, as became his superstition in the last war, so as to not breathe in the smell of unwashed skin and blood and tears that lingered so persistently on those sad, helpless Muggleborns, and pushes through to the room beyond where, as he'd suspected, three large Dementors float in the centre of the room.

Percy inhales sharply as the mist curls toward him. Faintly, he hears the sound of screams, feels the raw, jagged feeling of Fred's death. But strangely, the horrors of the last war seem at times to pale in comparison to the misery of his current life, whether because the distance in time has blunted their impact, or because in this timeline he has seen more horrid things than before. Percy is able to firm his grip around his wand and take a deep, steadying breath, his nose wrinkled at the wretched, rancid smell of the Dementors. His Patronus is still rather… unreliable, but in his other hand, he holds one of the Portkeys he'd made to transport himself back to his flat.

"I wish to speak to you," Percy calls out into the echo of the room. His voice does not waver. "I need your help."

For a second, nothing happens, and Percy begins to mentally curse himself in his head. Of course the Dementors are classified not even as *beings* but as *magical creatures*. They do not have coherent thought, unlike centaurs. Why had he thought this is a good idea?

Then the biggest Dementor dispatches itself from the others and floats slowly down until it is hovering in front of Percy. He tenses, palms sweaty, but the flood of terror he expects from proximity to the Dementors does not crash over him like a wave. No, all of the fear he is feeling is entirely justified, and entirely his own.

What help do you require, worker of the Ministry, sounds suddenly in Percy's head, and he jumps in surprise. The voice does not sound human, nor like a male or a female, but it is recognizably a voice, and Percy can tell it comes from the Dementor.

The Dementor looks at Percy steadily. This close to it, Percy can see the faint outline of its face, the thick, dark, mottled flesh and the suggestion of two eyes and a mouth. He breathes in deeply again, feeling a bit faint, and then regrets it as he gets a mouthful of the wretched, rotting smell emanating from the Dementor. "I want to know what you know about souls."

He jumps again a second later, as the Dementor's eerie laugh echoes in his mind. ***What we know about souls would take an eternity to relate,*** the Dementor says. ***It is our secret and our burden.***

Percy had not known that Dementors could speak, let alone laugh. He swallows and then tries, "Is your loyalty to the Dark Lord?"

Our loyalty is to the Ministry, while we are bound. Then our loyalty is to ourselves.

Percy can't help it. He has to ask. "Bound?"

The Dementor extends slowly a hand from under his tattered cloak. Percy tenses, but the thin, skeleton hand does not move any closer to Percy. ***Look.***

"I don't see anything."

This time, the Dementor's voice has a definite tinge of impatience. ***Look with your magic.***

Percy tightens his grip around his wand but obediently breathes out again in a sorry attempt to calm himself, attempting to allow his mind to clear and feel the magic in the room. It takes him a few minutes, but eventually the panic clears from his mind, and when he looks again at the Dementor he sees to his surprise that its wrist is bound with thin gold chains of magic.

"It looks like a vow," Percy says in surprise. "Like an Unbreakable Vow."

The Ministry forced us to swear, centuries ago, the Dementor reveals, and Percy knows he is not imagining the anger in the Dementor's tone. ***We swore to serve the Ministry, and the Ministry swore to give us souls to guard.***

"To—guard? I thought you, er, ate the souls," Percy says, flushing a bit in embarrassment at his awkward wording. "To feed."

The Dementor's eyes flash from beneath its hood. ***We are guardians of the dead,*** it intones solemnly. ***We see your souls, and we absorb your fear and your terror. We watch you until you are ready to die, and then we take your soul when you no longer have use for it.***

"Why do we feel fear, when we are around you?"

Because we feel your fear, the Dementor thunders suddenly. ***Because you feel our rage. Because we have been tricked, and we cannot harm you otherwise, unless on the Ministry's command! We were given souls to guard in a prison, and we are not able to fulfill our task to take your soul to the beyond.***

"But you aren't always working with the Ministry," Percy objects. "I've seen you."

We are meant to release the magic within the souls when humans die, says the Dementor sorrowfully. Percy gasps. It's the central tenant of magic, of course: that magic is neither created nor destroyed. He'd never thought about what happened to the magic inside each person when they die. Then, more forcefully, the Dementor continues, ***But we soon learned we can use that magic to break our bonds. Every time the Ministry orders us to take a soul prematurely, or a human dies unnecessarily in our care, another one of us is freed.***

Percy staggers back, feeling sick to his stomach. So every time the Dark Lord or the Ministry ordered the Dementors to suck out a person's soul, another one of these foul creatures was released into the world to feed without command.

We do not eat your souls for nourishment, the Dementor says forcefully, as if following the train of Percy's thoughts. ***But we are not content in bondage. Free me and I will help you.***

"You do not even know what I want you to do."

I will not help you if I remain bound, says the Dementor solemnly.

"I'm not going to *give* you someone to kill," says Percy incredulously.

You have killed before.

Percy's mouth goes dry, and he trembles unconsciously as a shiver crawls down his spine. "You can…you can sense that?"

To Percy, the Dementor's voice sounds derisive, and faintly pitying. ***Did you not know that to kill is to leave a mark on your soul?***

"I did know," Percy whispers, his hand faltering as it holds his wand. "I've studied souls for years. But there's so much I don't know. So much I'll *need* to know for my task."

What is your task?

Percy huffs out a laugh, unsure how to even begin explaining to this Dementor the tangled web of lies and obligations and burdens he has woven for the last decade. "There is somebody who has split his soul a number of times," he says carefully. "And I believe he is

continuing to do so. I don't know how else to track down those pieces, so I thought to come to you."

Why come to us?

"Well it is like you said," Percy points out, feeling defensive. "You and your kind know more about souls than anything else. I figured I may as well come to an expert."

The Dementor hovers in front of him quietly, thoughtfully. ***You do not fear me, though some of our kind terrorized your Ministry.***

Percy coughs out another laugh. How can he explain, that between killing Bellatrix Lestrange and murdering a Muggle and meeting the Dark Lord and lying to Barty and apologising to Dumbledore that asking a Dementor for help does not seem altogether frightening? Particularly since this Dementor does not seem as if it wants to scare Percy with the terror of his own thoughts. In fact, being this close to the Dementor rather reminds Percy of all those sun-warmed afternoons sitting near Myrtle's chill, if he can ignore the smell, though he imagines she'd be offended at the comparison.

"No," he admits. "I'm desperate enough to come here and ask for your help. But I understand that you don't want to give it, and I'm sorry that you've been enslaved by the Ministry. I would help if I could, I really would, but I already have one impossible task to fail at, and I am not keen to add another."

He turns to go. He's two steps away from the door when he feels the chill of the Dementor near his right shoulder.

Souls can be sensed, the Dementor says quietly, the words appearing in Percy's mind like gently falling snow. ***They can be seen. I do not know if your eyes can see them, but ours can.***

Percy turns eagerly back to the Dementor. "Maybe with your magic," he suggests, itching to pull out a scroll and begin taking notes. "A transformative force, or something like it."

The Dementor shakes his head. ***It is not like your magic. It is something more ancient.***

Percy waves this aside. Dementor magic must undoubtedly be different from wizard magic. Percy doesn't think this is a particularly controversial idea. "So do you think I can sense souls?"

Have you ever sensed your own?

Percy hesitates, thinking of Tom, and then shakes his head.

The Dementor is quiet for several long seconds. Percy notices the other two Dementors continue to float in lazy circles toward the top of the ceiling, as if content not to listen or interact with him. ***Some wizards have another form,*** the Dementor says finally. ***We find it harder to sense.***

“An Animagus,” agrees Percy, feeling a familiar spark of excitement as something collides together in his mind. “Yes. Animagi do not feel the effects of Dementors as strongly.”

We find it harder to sense, but not impossible, the Dementor considers slowly, as if thoughtfully. In the back of his head, Percy marvels at this encounter, at the way that the Dementor is so clearly capable of logic and reasoning. Is this how Dolores Umbridge communicated with the Dementors? Did she waltz in and negotiate with them, as coolly as she pleased, promising to provide them victims for their freedom in exchange for their obedience? ***Your soul remains within you, as you change form.***

“I can change forms,” Percy says animatedly. “So perhaps I can try to sense what remains the same…and anyway, when I am an Animagus I don’t have magic. I’ve always thought souls were separate from magic, you know. When I’m a lynx, I don’t have my magic, not really, but I *must* have my soul, otherwise I would lose my sense of self.”

I do not know if this would work, the Dementor says. ***But you may try, I suppose. It matters not to me.***

“Well, if I’m able to sense my own soul, will you teach me the rest?” Percy asks eagerly.

You will have to do something for me.

Percy hesitates, some of the excitement leaking from him. “I can’t bring you a victim.”

But you can research our vow.

“My task would have to come first,” Percy explains, though part of him is itching to run off to the library immediately and look into the history of Dementors.

The Dementor regards Percy thoughtfully from behind his ragged hood. Then it extends its hand again, skeletal and eerie. ***We have waited an eternity, and we can wait for more, if we believe we will one day be freed.***

At the end of it, there's nothing else for Percy to do. Feeling like he is in a dream, Percy reaches out and shakes the Dementor’s hand.

***

Though Percy practises with his Animagus form for the rest of the month, he cannot seem to understand what the Dementor means. As a lynx he cannot do magic; he can smell far better than as a person, and his eyesight is strangely different. He can run without tiring, feeling his four limbs bound under him in a manner that would be completely alien to his human form. But he can still think his own thoughts. His mind is the same. And his magic must be there, somewhere, if only to power the transformation back to human.

But what about him is *central* to his being?

He'll have to ask McGonagall, he decides, though he doesn't fancy explaining away why he is trying to foster an awareness of his own soul. And he'll have to ask her in person, since he can't imagine explaining his dilemma in a letter.

In the meantime, the project, though frustrating, gives him a floating sense of excitement every time he clears his mind and sits cross-legged on his bed, trying to call up a sense of his own sense, to understand the central tenets of his being. It reminds him of school, of lessons with McGonagall, of the thrill of seeing his body change limb by limb into a form that had been buried inside him this whole time. It is pure, unsullied, theoretical, complex *magic*, and he delights in it. It's been so *long* since he's had a project he can exult in…!

(***Magic is might, not a question of souls***, says Tom disdainfully in his head, but Percy is able to ignore it.)

Percy doesn't know whether Harry brought up Andromeda to Dumbledore or whether Andromeda refused to take no for an answer. Either way, she arranges to meet him at Grimmauld Place on the fourth weekend in September.

When Percy Apparates, there's a stretched out, frightening second where he feels the Fidelius Charm evaluating him, and then the burning sting of another spell that diverts him from wherever he would have landed in the house to the only place he's been allowed access: the bedroom of Regulus Arcturus Black, former supporter and enemy of the Dark Lord.

Percy looks around him with interest, but he hears the sound of Andromeda arriving and so steps cautiously into the hallway. He'll thoroughly explore Regulus' bedroom later. Now that he's successfully arrived in the Order's stronghouse, he has a great desire to investigate every inch of it, to see all the secrets out of which he'd been kept for the last two years.

The ancestral Black house is dark and gloomy and oddly claustrophobic, heavy portraits lining the walls, and every inch of available space covered in ancient looking furniture. Percy eyes the house elf heads as he makes his way downstairs and shudders.

"Yes," Andromeda says behind him quietly. "Not my particular cup of tea. Sirius hated this house."

"So you convinced Dumbledore to let you into the Order?"

"In a way." Andromeda leads him down another narrow flight of stairs and into a dingy kitchen with a large iron stove and larger wooden table. Percy takes a seat at the table and an ancient house elf, looking only minutes away from joining his brethren on the wall, serves him a cup of tea with a low, malicious murmur.

Percy looks at the cup of tea dubiously. He wouldn't put it past the house elf to poison him, particularly when one of the elf's mutterings involves the words *nasty blood traitor.* After being called the opposite so often, it's a bit of a relief, if he's being honest. "What do you mean?"

Andromeda looks pleased with herself despite herself. "I merely pointed out that I could feasibly challenge Sirius' right to the house, given that Bellatrix has passed on and Sirius is

immobilised. He capitulated quickly after that. Both Ted and I joined the Order last weekend."

Percy grins despite himself. He wishes he could have seen Andromeda threatening Dumbledore. "Can you?"

Andromeda shrugs archly. "Perhaps," she says coolly. "Perhaps not. But nevertheless Albus saw the wisdom in allowing me access to the Black house. With Sirius in his condition…"

"Has it worsened?"

Instead of responding, Andromeda merely looks at him steadily, a glimpse of her pain in her dark, gleaming eyes. She does look remarkably like Bellatrix, and Percy feels a shiver of guilt run down his spine, like a lizard scratching its claws down each vertebrae.

"Filthy blood traitor heir," mutters the house elf, washing the table with a dirty rag.

"Do not speak of Sirius like that," Andromeda snaps back, raising her voice imperiously. The house elf flinches as the command registers and he gives an exaggeratedly obsequious bow, picking up his rag and shuffling away.

A second later an unearthly scream is unleashed throughout the house, jarring and screeching. Percy flinches violently and raises a shielding spell without a second thought, but though Andromeda winces, she does not look concerned.

"What is that?" Percy demands.

"My aunt," says Andromeda tiredly. "You should remember not to raise your voice in this house, Mr. Weasley-Prewett. You never know who may be listening."

Andromeda's aunt turns out to be an absolutely *mammoth* portrait, larger than the one of Tom he has hanging on the wall. To commission a life-sized portrait of herself would take a shocking amount of money, particularly if Mr. Barrington had been the one to do it, which would be fairly likely, all things considered.

The portrait stops shrieking about intruders in her home and gives her niece an unimpressed look. "Still not dead?"

"Still alive," Andromeda says brightly. "Did anyone tell you that Bella cursed Sirius, and he won't awaken?"

The portrait sniffs. "I wondered why he'd been so quiet. Bella's out of Azkaban then, is she? Good. Maybe she can restore some honour to our name."

"She's dead, Auntie," Andromeda continues, still in that bright, cheerful tone. Percy can suddenly see Tonks very clearly in her mother, in the high, imperious cheekbones and dark, intense eyes, the glossy brown hair that is nearly black, shared among Tonks, Andromeda, Bellatrix, and Sirius' mother.

"Dead? So the vault will fall to...not you...Narcissa, then."

"Looks like it," Andromeda says, but her tone is significantly more brittle. "But dear old Cissy is hosting the Dark Lord in her house, and by the sounds of it, her and Lucius won't last the year. Maybe you should have left some more eligible heirs, Auntie. Looks like all the baby Death Eaters won't live to see adulthood."

The portrait sits heavily back in her chair, covering her mouth with shock. "It can't be…"

"Oh, yes. The Black line will die out for your stubbornness," her niece bites. "Oh, and you didn't hear? Regulus betrayed the Dark Lord."

"Regulus…" this last betrayal seems to be her undoing, and the portrait begins to sob, great big painted tears sliding off her face and making a puddle on the floor. Percy eyes it curiously; how had the painter managed that?

Andromeda gives the portrait a look of disgust. "Let's go see Sirius."

Sirius is in his room, asleep in bed, surrounded by a faintly shimmering monitoring ward. His room is as dark and dingy as the rest of the house, though with the persistent odour of sickness that makes Percy want to gag. Andromeda examines her cousin carefully, and her expression grows grimmer by the second.

“Will he die?” Percy asks tentatively.

"He will," Andromeda confirms darkly. "If we don't act quickly."

“How quickly?”

Andromeda looks at Percy, and understanding passes between them in a heartbeat. Their task is more important. Andromeda can try and save Sirius, but not at the expense of the Horcruxes. "I would estimate one year from the curse's inception," she says, answering Percy slowly. "This is a Black family curse; it will only work if a Black curses another Black."

"What is it?" Imagine, a curse that can have such specificity! And people have the audacity to claim that everyone's blood is the same! Clearly there is a difference in blood, or curses like this would be impossible.

"It is a curse meant for a situation like this; when one heir dares to challenge another. It is a test of wills. In this situation, the vault would be temporarily open to them both—and whoever is able to find the correct counter curse within the vault first would win control of it. It gives the caster an advantage, of course, since the cursed might lose a few days, but in theory it is meant to equalise a situation between two strong contenders to be the heir-presumptive. My guess is that Bellatrix wanted access to the house, for some reason."

Percy frowns, wondering if Bellatrix had wanted access to the house on the Dark Lord's orders. Perhaps Voldemort has tracked down Regulus too, in which case they ought to worry what else he may be investigating. "But Sirius is still asleep."

"Bellatrix died, and someone that is not a Black killed her," Andromeda says, gripping one of Sirius’ limp hands. "It has placed the curse in limbo; I think he would have one year to

complete the task, otherwise he will die."

"Bellatrix's role in the curse does not pass to Narcissa?" Percy interjects, instead of apologising again for his role in her sister's death.

Andromeda looks thoughtfully at Sirius's sleeping form. "Perhaps," she says slowly, "But we can't be sure."

"So can we go to the vault?"

Now Andromeda does meet Percy's eyes. "We cannot without Narcissa."

Who would have thought that Narcissa Malfoy would be so crucial to this war?

"And you think she would not acquiesce to help her cousin?" Percy asks curiously. Family, he knows from experience, is meant to trump all else, even personal loyalty or political opinion. It is why Draco Malfoy can be easily forgiven for following the Dark Lord to protect his family, and Percy had been and will be so reviled for doing the same thing.

"You don't understand," she snaps angrily. "Even without the Dark Lord living in her house, Narcissa would need to be convinced...when our parents removed me from the lineage, they did more than ruin a tapestry. Narcissa does not consider me family."

"So your magic no longer recognizes you or your blood?" Percy asks thoughtfully.

Andromeda glares. He ducks his head; an academic question for another time.

"We will need to get her alone," she says finally. "I will speak to her. Say nothing, do you understand? Say nothing to the rest of the Order. This is a private affair and we will treat it as such."

After Andromeda leaves, Percy makes his way to Regulus' room, pausing first to examine the carefully lettered sign, so like one he had inked in his very best handwriting and stuck up on his door when he was ten. The door has a sturdy, brass handle with small leaf detail—a sign of the Black's wealth, he supposes—and it glows softly when Percy lays his hand on it.

He can understand why Severus had suggested Regulus' room for him, he muses as he stands in the centre of the room, looking around him curiously. He doubts any of the Order members would think to enter it, and even if they did, it is clear from his initial examination that the room that it has remained largely untouched since Regulus' school days.

There are large green and silver hangings, tastefully draped over his bed, on the wall, and even over the windows. Far from being garish, Percy finds that he quite likes the effect, making the stuffy, ostentatious room feel more lived-in, without resorting to the garish over-reliance on gold and red that most Gryffindors succumb to when decorating.

Over the bed, there is a large Black family crest clearly hand-painted with care. Percy kneels on the bed, coughing slightly as dust billows where the bedding crinkles, and reaches out with a finger to trace the painted lines. He hadn't known Regulus liked to paint. Of course he hadn't known, given he knows nothing about Regulus, but the sight of the crest has the same

effect as the Slytherin hangings, or the picture of Regulus and his friends laughing and waving as they clutch their brooms: it is humanising, oddly so, and Percy feels a sudden well of sorrow for this boy, who had likely been led by his nose right to the Dark Lord. He wouldn't have had any more choice than Draco Malfoy. Less, presumably, given that Sirius had so famously defied his family to join forces with Dumbledore. Percy can't help but wonder what Regulus had done for his initiation, what his task had been, set by a younger Tom to seek revenge on the Black family for the eldest heir embarrassing an old and ancient pureblood family.

On the opposite wall from the bed, Regulus had hung up a series of newspaper clippings, yellowed and crinkled with age. Percy looks at them curiously. They are all about Voldemort, of course; but he recognizes nearly all of them. He'd done the same series of research when he'd first twisted back in time, newly eleven and in the Hogwarts library, flipping through the old *Daily Prophets*, though of course these would have been more recently published when Regulus was searching.

This is not a wall of adulation, as a stranger might have supposed. These papers, collected like this, show a picture of Tom Riddle's life, his movements and his triumphs. Regulus had not been pinning news of the Dark Lord on his walk for fun; he'd been *researching* him, and Percy would bet for the very same reason that he had, all those years ago.

Somehow, somewhere, Regulus had learned of the Horcruxes. Perhaps he'd only heard of one, or maybe he'd been clever enough to investigate all of them. But somewhere, somehow, Regulus had learned that there was a way to make the Dark Lord mortal again, and he'd devoted the rest of his short life to the hope of success.

The locket isn't in the room, of course. Percy searches it diligently, but there is nothing else of interest, only the paraphernalia of a teenaged boy. But Regulus lingers in his mind for the rest of the day, though if questioned Percy would struggle to articulate why it means so much to him to learn of this poor, cursed Black child, smart enough to discern what needed to be done, but not quite quick enough to escape the ramifications that followed.

***

October 1996

The month of October is characteristically miserable, with loud, gusty winds rattling Percy's apartment windows each night and the tensions at the Ministry rising each day. His only solace is that Scrimgeour is a fairly competent Minister, and so working with him is actually a pleasure, rather than a misery. At the very least, Scrimgeour writes many of his own speeches and correspondence, so Percy has fewer pointless tasks to complete each day, though he of course has many more items on his planner than he would like. Percy is always scrupulously polite, responsible, and alert, as he'd been with Fudge, but for a rather different reason, and Scrimgeour seems to respond well to it, which makes Percy hope that perhaps in

this timeline Scrimgeour will have cause to keep him around beyond his red hair and tenuous connections to Harry Potter.

By far what comes to define October for Percy is the Dark Lord, both of them. Tom appears back in Percy's apartment in mid-October, looking exhilarated and very much alive. Percy is at his kitchen counter, preparing meals for the next week under strong preservation charms, when he looks up to see Tom watching him with an unreadable expression on his face.

"Tom," says Percy in surprise. Then, eagerly, "*Tom.* You're back. Is He—have you—"

"He is mad," Tom says. He holds himself carefully aloof, tension thrumming through every painted stroke of his body. Percy swallows, sets down the spoon he was holding, and walks past the kitchen counter into the small living room. Percy had, for a while, considered the idea of staying in Regulus' room, but with Tom's absence over the last few weeks, his flat had felt almost like home again. Only now does he realise how anxious he is whenever Tom's cool gaze tracks him from his perch on the wall.

"What happened?"

"He is obsessed with Harry Potter," Tom says with disgust, as if he himself did not ask for news of Harry eagerly at every opportunity. "He is not making any plans. His Death Eaters are unruly and lax. I would never have allowed for such a lack of discipline. I eavesdrop on them in Malfoy Manor; they do not fear him as they should."

"He is trying to find Harry?"

"Apparently their wands are not compatible." Tom rolls his eyes and collapses into the chair, and Percy feels some of the tension between them evaporate quietly away as they return to their normal positions. "As if I would need a wand to kill a sixteen year old boy, even one touched by prophecy. *The one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord approaches, born as the seventh month dies*," he quotes. "Seems like your knowledge of the prophecy was correct."

Percy mentally breathes a sigh of relief. Then, carefully, "The Dark Lord knows the prophecy?"

"Only the same half that you learned," Tom confirms. "I suppose it is possible the boy has some advantage, but I cannot imagine what it would be. *He* thinks he needs a new wand, which is, of course, ridiculous. He ought to focus on finding the remainder of the prophecy and then chart an appropriate action."

This is a valid point. The Dark Lord had concocted a plan to break into the Ministry and lure Harry to the appropriate shelf—but he could have entered the Ministry at any time and plucked the prophecy off the shelf himself. Presumably the Seer of the prophecy could be located, but the Dark Lord does not seem to have considered attempting to kidnap her, whoever she may be.

"He has no plan?"

“He believes he will rule by fear, and fear will give him absolute power,” Tom says with another expressive eye-roll. “He *delights* in it. He enjoys murder, enjoys torture. I am not squeamish, of course, but I do not murder for murder’s sake.”

Percy privately doubts this, thinking of the basilisk, thinking of some of the memories that diary-Tom showed him, thinking of the Inferi in the lake, but he sensibly keeps his mouth shut. If Tom wants to think of himself as superior than the Dark Lord, then all the better.

“And the Horcruxes?”

Tom throws a poisonous glance at the edges of his frame, as if to blame them for his inability to remove the Dark Lord himself. “He’s making another,” he says darkly, and Percy feels something inside him freeze. “He would not confirm whether he had made a sixth, but he *must* have made only five before Harry Potter defeated him. He *must* know he cannot survive another split.”

“You must be correct,” says Percy carefully. If the Dark Lord only has five Horcruxes, their task will be much easier. His mouth feels dry; there *has* to be some way to know how many Horcruxes exist. There *has* to be. Percy has been practising his Animagus transfiguration before bed, but not as rigorously as he ought to have been. He won’t make that mistake anymore. “It would make Him too weak to attempt a sixth split.”

“*He* is weaker than he ought to be,” agrees Tom. Sighing, the portrait runs his finger through his hair and then looks up at Percy, his eyes flashing. “We *need* to find the locket or the cup. I may need to challenge him in a duel before the year is out.”

“A—a duel?” Percy repeats, taken aback. “But surely you could defeat him otherwise. Could you not absorb his magic into your own?”

Tom shakes his head, frustrated. “I believe the ritual we’ve planned will work only on inert pieces of soul, and I dare not risk possessing him. Find the locket, Percy. I’ll keep an eye on *him*.”

Introducing Tom to the Dark Lord has the expected but nevertheless nerve-wracking side effect of placing Percy firmly in the Dark Lord’s attention. He is summoned often to Malfoy Manor, and more than once he looks up to find Voldemort watching him carefully, but whether because he suspects Percy of being a traitor or because he is interested in understanding Tom’s relationship with Percy, Percy cannot say.

Percy is not asked, yet, to participate directly in any raids. What he does have to do is, in a way, far worse. As Severus warned him, the Dark Lord seems keen to test Percy’s *mettle*, or perhaps his capacity for witnessing violence without turning and running tail. Percy is summoned more than once to Malfoy Manor, only to be told to stand in the back, masked and robed, while a delegation of Death Eaters spiritedly torture and kill their enemies. It reminds Percy of Tom’s memories, of watching Avery and Nott and Greengrass and the rest practise their magic on animals under Tom’s careful guidance, but in real life the horror is almost more than Percy can bear.

And the Dark Lord watches him, often, during these times. The Dark Lord watches how he talks to the other Death Eaters—cautiously, politely, respectfully—and whether he flinches when those same pureblood heirs turn their wands on defenceless Muggles and Muggleborns. He watches how Percy stands, entirely still, his face as impassive as he can make it, forcing himself to emulate those steel armoured knights dotting the halls of Hogwarts. Percy does not know why he is not asked to participate, but he takes it for a small mercy. Part of him finds it incredibly difficult to stand and watch; part of him finds it repugnant to stay put while an innocent is brutally killed. But the other part of him knows that he would not be able to save any of them even if he tried. They'd kill him before he reached for his wand, and then they'd probably kill Severus, next.

All Percy can do is go for drinks with the Death Eaters after these horrific sessions and hear them boast and brag over pints of the finest creature-made liquors. All Percy can do is write the names of the victims and pass them surreptitiously to Tonks. Nobody has yet been sloppy enough to tip Percy off about an upcoming attack, but he hopes at least by cataloguing the dead to the best of his ability, their families will not drive themselves mad with worry.

As October darkens, to give way to the imperious chill of November, Percy almost feels he may have a handle on things. He's not sleeping, not even a little, but he's figured out the optimal dose of Dreamless Sleep which allows him to eek out a few hours of dosed dozing without risking an addiction. His Glamour charms are even better than they were in the previous timeline, and he is able to shove each and every sickening Death Eater evening deep into his mental library, locking them in groaning trunks with bone-white buckles and then burying them deep beneath the floorboards.

(***I have been impressed with you, Percy***, says Tom, and Percy shoves that down too, deeper than the chests of his shameful compliance, deeper than anything else in his library save for the bright flash of pride he feels when he imagines Tom saying those words).

Despite Tom's scoffs at the unsophistication of the Dark Lord's plan—whatever it is—the ramifications settle slowly over the country and tighten, inch by inch, wherever there is laxity. Voldemort is exquisitely well-funded, due to the general wealth of his many followers, and he has a singular talent for channelling the Death Eaters' collective anger and rage into purposeful, decisive action. More than once Percy hears Voldemort smoothly, silkily, gently open a half-healed wound, point out a small injustice, twist an inconvenient truth, and convince a wizard who has never before intentionally caused harm to murder or torture or injure. More than once Percy hears Voldemort whisper insidiously about how *unfair* society is, how *unappreciated* they are, how *powerful* they can be, and more than once Percy finds to his horror that he believes it, just a little.

Every death, every disappearance, every pompous Ministry employee made to blubber with fear, every Muggle killed serves to separate *us* vs. *them* just a bit more, serves to make the Death Eaters feel powerful, serves to make the rest of society feel scared. It is incredibly effective, even if Percy cannot see to what end the Dark Lord is aiming.

Percy suspects that he saves his real plans for his Inner Circle, which, as far as he can tell, consists of Snape, Lucius, Yaxley, Rookwood, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Macnair, and Travers. He has approximately forty other Marked members. The vast majority of his followers are bound

by nothing more than fear, although Severus informs Percy via their linked notebooks that Voldemort is contemplating producing more circlets to tether the masses.

I don't understand, Severus. What does he want?

Power, destruction, chaos. He wants to take over the Ministry, of course, but through proxy leaders like Lucius and Yaxley. He has no interest in actually leading.

Tom snorts when he hears this. "More fool him. When I return, my first order of business will be Hogwarts, but make no mistake; the Ministry will be properly handled."

Both Toms share an obsession with Hogwarts, apparently. Voldemort asks Percy about it eagerly, though he has to admit that he's not been back for many months. To Percy's surprise, he enjoys speaking about Hogwarts with the Dark Lord. After living in the castle for nearly two decades, he can speak of even the smallest details, and he finds that Voldemort's recall is as good as his own. Voldemort loved Hogwarts, which is a thought that always makes Percy feel a little funny inside to contemplate.

Do you think he would have become Him if not for Dumbledore?

It is an interesting question. Perhaps he would have been content with smaller arenas.

He catches sight of Narcissa Malfoy during his frequent visits to Malfoy Manor. Far from the lovely, bright woman she'd once been, this version of Narcissa is silent and cold, staring around her with wide, desperate eyes. She never speaks to Percy, but when she passes him the halls, her gaze is so arresting that he feels his throat close.

Percy does not dare to go back to the Dementor, not unless he has to. The Dementor had all but admitted it didn't know how to help Percy, and Percy does not think he can justify his sudden interest in the holding cells. Anyway, Percy is a wizard, and he's trying to seek a wizard's soul. He should be able to find something, oughtn't he?

And it's true, as the days pass, that Percy thinks he's getting *somewhere*. He can feel it, in his chest, sometimes, or in the curve of his shoulders, or sometimes in the bend of his knee. Something warm, something steady, something unutterably familiar, something that he reaches for when he first transfigures back into his human form, something he recognises as his own when he twists to lynx. Something that smells to him like sweet pine resin and the crackling of logs on a fire, like snapdragons in the cold spring and the crackle of leaves underfoot in the fall.

Landon comes to see him, looking irritable and tired, toward the end of October. "We're moving to France," he reports unceremoniously. "Father thinks the Dark Lord will be interested in him. I think it unlikely, and anyway, I'm handling *very* delicate work for the Ministry, since after that fiasco with the Hall of Prophecy all of our security wards are being reset. That seems not to matter to him, though. Will you come for supper tomorrow, before we leave?"

Percy blinks, thrown. "Er, you're leaving tomorrow?"

"I am not allowed to tell anyone when we are leaving," Landon says with a tense shrug, clearly unimpressed by his father's well justified paranoia. "But come, will you? Who knows when Father will allow me to return to Britain. Mother's gone already, staying with my grandparents. I bloody hope that's not where we're headed, too. Can you *imagine*?"

Tobias, for all his poise and grace and money, is a thrumming bundle of nerves when Percy arrives the following night. The house elf who escorts him into the main room has to clear his squeaky throat several times before Tobias looks away from where he is directing the other elves to pack up all his things.

"Ah, Percy, excellent," he mutters distractedly, turning back to a steady stream of expensive jewellery marching itself into a large, padlocked trunk. From the looks of it, he's emptied his entire Gringotts vault. "We'll eat soon. Fetch Landon, will you?"

Landon is also packing, though in a significantly more desultory sort of way. In fact, it looks more as though he's enjoying the nostalgic trip through his possessions, rather than packing up his room for what could be the last time. "Percy, hi," he says, noticing Percy after he lingers in the doorway for several seconds. "Look at this, will you?"

It is a stack of student periodicals from their various years at Hogwarts. Landon points to a picture that somebody must have taken during their fourth or fifth year, of them sitting together in the Great Hall, talking to Nearly Headless Nick. Landon looks at it fondly. "I really thought we'd find something," he says. "At least *one* artefact!"

If only he knew.

But it reminds Percy at supper—only chicken tonight, the quail reserved for better days—to take the opportunity to ask the Greengrasses about the small inscription that had been on the mysterious ring that Dumbledore found.

Tobias recognizes it right away. "It's Grindelwald's symbol, of course. I thought you both got Os on History of Magic."

Landon and Percy exchange looks. "Binns only taught us about the goblin rebellions," Landon objects. "So this was his Dark Mark?"

"I do not believe he branded *people* with it, but certainly it became associated with him," Tobias confirms.

"So if it was on a ring, for example, you would say that the ring belonged to Grindelwald?"

"Perhaps," Tobias says, raising an eyebrow at Percy. "But he had many followers, and many took up the symbol as a symbol for all he stood for. Why do you ask?"

"I am trying to find its origin," Percy says with a casual shrug. "You know me—if I don't have something to research then I get bored."

Landon snorts but Tobias looks at Percy carefully. "You will not find much about it in this country. He was significantly more powerful abroad, in Germany, Romania, Bulgaria, Spain.

But if Dumbledore had not defeated him, doubtlessly he would have spread into Britain as well."

"Do you think there was a prophecy about Dumbledore and Grindelwald?" Landon asks. "I heard the one about Potter and the Dark Lord smashed along with nearly three dozen others. Don't worry, Percy; I already looked it up, and neither you nor I have a prophecy recorded on file, though I imagine it's not too late for a Seer to see our obvious brilliance. I didn't think to check Dumbledore, though, before they locked up the list. Of course, now that I'm leaving my promising career at the Ministry, I shan't ever know, I suppose."

Of course. Of course there was a prophecy about Dumbledore and Grindelwald; why else would he have targeted Grindelwald when he did not even threaten Britain, why else would he be so adamant that only Harry Potter can defeat Voldemort? Dumbledore must be operating from the same rulebook that he once followed. Percy chews slowly as he thinks through whether one of those orbs that smashed on the ground had Dumbledore's lengthy name inscribed.

"Perhaps, but I do not take much stock in prophecies," says Tobias. Then he throws a glance at his son. "Better to be a few years delayed in your career than prematurely dead, wouldn't you say, Landon?"

Well, it is somewhere to start, Percy thinks to himself as Landon snaps back a bitter rejoinder. Possibly the ring is not important, but if Dumbledore was so tempted by it to risk death, then it *must* have been something meaningful. Perhaps the ring was not Tom's, but rather Grindelwald's, some remnant of Dumbledore's old enmity, or a symbol of his power.

Tobias clears his throat and sets down his fork. "Listen, Percy. I've heard—well, I know you are in a, shall we say, *precarious* position, but I would like you to know that I would be pleased to shelter you in France if you wish to join us, and any of your siblings who feel similarly. I will ask only that you make a Vow to not reveal the location of our house."

"You should use the Fidelius," says Percy. He does not automatically reject the idea; not for him, of course, but at least for Ginny or Fred and George. "I thank you for the offer, Lord Greengrass. I believe I will have to decline for myself, but I admit I see the wisdom of your suggestion for my siblings."

"Seems a bit unfair that he is allowed to stay in Britain," Landon says bitingly to his father. "Is my career not as important as his?"

"I am not his father," thunders Tobias, his voice suddenly stern. "But if I were, I would tell him the same that I told you: you need not sacrifice yourself for a fight that is not yours."

The fight is Percy's, of course. It is so much his that he sometimes has trouble imagining it as anyone else's.

"I cannot leave while my family is in danger," Percy says. "But I thank you for the offer."

Tobias looks resigned. "Call on Bathilda Bagshot. If you must continue on this wretched path, you may as well do it *quickly."*

Percy had barely known Bathilda Bagshot was alive. But, Tobias explains, she lives in Godric's Hollow— *Godric's Hollow,* where Dumbledore lived and the Potters died.

Be careful. Do not be seen.

Obviously.

He goes the following week, changing his appearance to be as nondescript as he can make it. Godric's Hollow is chilly and dark; he stops by the graveyard to silently pay his respects to the Potters, though he doesn't do anything as foolish as lay flowers on their grave. Undoubtedly he is being watched, but he has a lie prepared for that already, if any observers figure out who he is beneath the self-Transfiguration. Bathilda and Aunt Muriel are old friends, or something like it.

Godric's Hollow is precisely what Percy would have expected from the town where the Potters and Dumbledores settled: quaint, pretty, well-maintained, and undeniably wealthy. There are more Muggles that Percy would have expected, given the village's deep magical history, but Percy can feel the wards here, tied into the land, likely anchored into the town since Godric himself built himself a home here.

It is wandering through the graveyard when he notices the sign again, etched onto the corner of Ignotus Peverell's grave. Percy had noticed it during his first visit to the graveyard, largely due to the similarity of his middle name to the man's first, but he remembers now that the Peverell family was thought—though not proven—to be related to the Gryffindor line, due to their ancient lineage and proximity to Godric's Hollow.

The mark certainly cannot have originated with Grindelwald, then; merely appropriated. But why? Perhaps it truly is an ancient rune, more ancient than those still in use today. It likely means something like *power* or *blood*, if Percy knows his purebloods.

Bathilda Bagshot is tremendously old and very grey. She eyes him doubtfully when he raps neatly on her door, but allows him in when he reveals a yellowed photograph of Aunt Muriel and a woman she claimed was Bathilda, though the woman in question bears very little similarity to the laughing girl with dark eyes in the photo.

"Tell your Aunt I do not see very many people anymore," she says hoarsely, settling into the indent of a large, ornate red armchair that indicates just how much time she spends in that precise position. "I will have to turn down her invitation to her birthday party. I do not like to be reminded of my age."

"Oh, neither does she," says Percy with a laugh that Bathilda does not return. He clears his throat and presses forward. "Madam, have you lived in Godric's Hollow your entire life?"

"Of course," she says, as if that were a tremendously stupid question. "You're not here to talk about Albus, are you? I told that woman that I will not speak of him."

"Er, what woman?"

"That journalist."

Rita Skeeter, presumably. Percy shakes his head. "No, I care not for Dumbledore. I came merely because my aunt wished desperately for me to extend the invitation in person."

"I am declining," she says shortly. "You may now go."

"Before I go, could I ask a quick question?" Percy tries. "I saw this symbol on a grave. I thought it was Grindelwald's symbol, but it's not, is it?"

Bathilda examines the drawing that Percy hands her with beady eyes. "It is the symbol of the Peverells, of course," she says sharply. "Do the youth not study their history anymore?"

"I, of course, read all of your books, Madam—"

Bathilda laughs creakily. "Don't pander to me, boy. It is the sign of the Peverell family, of the Hallows."

"The Hallows?"

And thus it is from Bathilda Bagshot and her withering tone that Percy learns of the Deathly Hallows.

A wand with impossible power...a cloak of invisibility...a stone to bring back the dead.

Percy may have dismissed these as myth, once, but he is well accustomed to seeing conspiracy in plots others would disregard as frivolous, and did he not once examine Harry's cloak of invisibility? He'd used the Crouch cloak in the Ministry, and even then he'd noticed its rough texture, the slight shimmer in the air that revealed its use. Harry's cloak is a thing of beauty. Percy wishes he'd looked at it more closely.

And the connection to Grindelwald is obvious, of course. He had the wand. No wonder Dumbledore went out of his way to defeat him. There likely had been no prophecy at all; Dumbledore must have learned that Grindelwald commanded the Elder Wand and then engineered the entire war to ensure that Dumbledore became the next recipient of its power. Presumably Dumbledore is still the owner of the Elder Wand, which means that if all goes according to plan, so will Snape inherit its allegiance.

But does it count if Dumbledore is *expecting* the blow? No wonder he was so desperate that Severus kill him—perhaps by arranging a suicide, Dumbledore thinks he will die as the last true owner of the Elder Wand, a fitting legacy for a vain and powerful wizard.

Severus needs to defeat Dumbledore in a way Dumbledore does not expect, and then they will have the Wand.

As for the Stone...Percy cares not for speaking with the dead, but logic would suggest the ring that Dumbledore died to obtain was likely inset with the Resurrection Stone. Certainly, Severus' drawing of the gem in the ring looks similar to the picture that Bathilda points to in an old tome: a dark, triangular stone with sharp, glistening edges.

Suddenly much of the opacity shielding Dumbledore's actions becomes clear. Percy wonders if Tom knows about the Deathly Hallows. Perhaps not; but Dumbledore must be trying to

collect all three before his death. Does Dumbledore believe that he can cheat death?

Percy is not sure what is more frightening; the thought of Tom, immortal forever, or Dumbledore.

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On Samhain, Percy arrives clad in his Death Eater robes and his Death Eater mask and finds himself in the middle of a massacre.

He has to stop and clutch his wand tightly in his pocket, breathing heavily through his nose, to contain his shock at the sight when he arrives at the Apparation coordinates. The Samhain revels are not being held at Malfoy Manor, but rather in the middle of a large field, somewhere south of Wilshire. Tom had told him to expect a significant display of magic, some revelry, the traditional ritual around the fire. This, however, is something entirely different.

The field is large, bounded by great dark trees waving their spiked branches ominously in the wind. There is a fire, like Percy had expected, a massive blaze floating in the centre of the space, flames of red and gold and blue and green. A tremendous cloud of smoke hangs above the fire, obstructing his vision, and though Percy had not yet been acquainted with the smell of burning flesh, he knows suddenly that the acrid stench permeating the air is precisely the smell of bodies thrown upon the pyre.

There are bodies everywhere: bodies bleeding, bodies spinning in the air, bodies with mouths still screaming and limbs flailing, bodies that are still but likely still warm. And where there are bodies there are Death Eaters, and everywhere Percy looks he sees dark cloaks and naked bodies and gleaming white masks and blood, blood everywhere, seeping into the crushed grass, creating a dirty, macabre pool of mud.

He doesn't know how he is still standing. Percy looks around him, and he realises a moment later that he is crying soundlessly, tears dripping from either side of his mask in a futile effort to purify the air around him. He does not know whether these bodies are Muggle or wizard, friend or foe, but they are people nonetheless, and to Apparate into such savagery is shocking and vile.

"Death Eaters, to me!" howls Voldemort, his voice high and wild and ecstatic. The Death Eaters—maybe thirty in total, though to Percy's panicked eyes they seem innumerable—cry and cheer in response, forming a dark circle of gleaming white masks around the fire.

Percy finds himself shepherded in with the rest. Up close to the fire the smell of bodies is even stronger, and Percy gags on the smoke, his tongue heavy and disgusting in his mouth. He is still crying, soundlessly, helplessly, and his face is twisted in perpetual disgust, his stomach heaving. The Death Eaters heave and move together, an impenetrable mass of people thrumming with the same energy and purpose. He feels like he is in a dream, sounds

sliding in and out of his ears, the only sensation that feels very real the terrible nauseating burn of bodies turning into ash.

“We are denied entry into society,” Voldemort bellows, and the Death Eaters boo and hiss. “We are pushed to the very sides of the room, we are mocked, we are belittled, *we are ignored*, but tonight we are kings!”

Percy can’t bring himself to cry out with the rest, flinching at the roar that erupts from the gathered crowd. His skin drips wetly with sweat, his eyes burning behind his glasses, and he feels the dampness of the men pressed in tightly next to him. Oh, Merlin, what is he *doing*?

Voldemort’s voice changes suddenly, dropping to a conversational tone that nevertheless echoes in Percy’s ears as if he were standing right next to him. “Samhain is considered to be the division point in the year,” he lectures, as if he were Tom standing there, rather than a monster. “The point where summer, the time of the light, turns indelibly into winter, the time of darkness.” His voice rises again, gathering in volume. “So too will this night mark the point when our time comes. So too will this night mark the point where we cannot be ignored any longer. We sacrifice this blood to our ancestors, we call upon our magic, we are here and we will not be forsaken any longer!”

Before Percy’s horrified eyes, Voldemort levitates a child above the flames. The child shrieks and cries and twists wildly under the Cruciatus, or something like it, but what happens next is even more awful to see. Voldemort ends the torture, and for a second all is quiet except for the quiet sobs of the child, suspended in midair.

And then with a curse, the child’s chest splits open, and his entrails drip down into the flames below.

And suddenly Percy can bear it no longer. He stumbles away from the thickly dripping blood, from the wild screams of laughter and pain. He doesn't belong here; he's not a killer, or a spy, or even a hero. He's nothing more than an arrogant swot, good natured but uptight, capable but vain. He never should have taken on this burden; he never should have twisted himself through time. He should be trying to date girls, or working toward a promotion, or at the very least hiding with his family. Not here, not with the twin deaths of a Muggle and a witch on his hands, not with a Dark Lord in his apartment and a Dark Lord in his head and a Dark Lord in front of him, laughing with wild and reckless glee as he twists his wand in his pale, white hands.

When had he last been that boy? Had he killed him too when he started the ritual? Had it begun when Fred had first died? Or had the death of Percy Weasley happened slowly, insidiously, every time Percy pushed forward the line that separates good intentions from unforgivable actions? First he'd been afraid of Dark magic, and then he'd worked up the courage to try it, and then he'd written to Tom, and now all of his actions have buried him brick by brick inside a furnace of his own making.

Gasping, crying, he threads his way unsteadily out of the fray, barely making it to the small copse of trees at the edge of the clearing before retching violently, his body slick and shivering.

"It will pass," says a voice. Percy looks up, his mouth full of the taste of blood and vomit, his glasses smudged, his eyes wide and staring, and Severus is above him, looking tremendously sad, even under his shining, bone-white mask. He holds out a hand. When Percy takes it, they vanish, and appear on the riverbank, under the same wide branches of the oak tree. Percy drops to his knees and retches again, but nothing comes up, only the unstoppable urge to rid his stomach of the evil inside it.

Percy hesitates. He'd told Severus his secret all those years ago because he'd had to, because he'd not wanted to be alone, and now he regrets it. If Severus weren't there to observe him, Percy would just disappear, run away, kill himself, even, so as not to suffer through this torment any longer. "I can't do this anymore. You have to finish it for me."

"You can," says Severus simply, still extending a hand, though Percy is still shaking on the ground. "You feel as though you do not recognize yourself. Perhaps what you know has saved lives; all you know are the lives that you have taken. Whatever you thought you were before no longer exists, and you cannot hope to see what you may be when the dust settles around you."

"*I can't do this anymore, Severus!"*

"*You will* do it because it needs to be done!" thunders Snape, more strongly than before. "I have done it. You will do it. And together we will do what needs to be done. That is who we are, Percy. That is who we will be when the dust clears. We will not be heroes; likely we will not be alive. But we will have done our duty."

"Why didn't you Obliviate me?" Percy asks with a hiccuping gasp. "Or tell Dumbledore? All those years ago?"

"You gave me hope again," Severus says simply, raising an eyebrow. "And perhaps I was just sentimental enough to believe you deserved to see your redemption through."

Percy hiccups out a laugh. Like Severus is ever sentimental. "I have no hope now."

"You do, you silly boy. We know four of six. We are nearly done. If you falter now you will regret it for all of your days."

"How do you know?"

Severus looks at Percy, and his pain is so raw, so aching, that Percy's throat closes with the impact of it. "I overheard the prophecy about the Boy Who Lived," he whispers. "I gave it to Him, and he killed her."

Percy tries to imagine that, tries to imagine if one day he were to know someone he loved had died, and it had been directly his fault. He can imagine it easily, and the idea makes him sway unsteadily. He sits back on his haunches and stares, eyes wide-open, at Severus.

Severus gives a mirthless laugh. "I saw the death of your brother in your mind," he whispers. "I felt what you felt. You cannot falter now, Percy, or I promise you that you will regret it for the rest of your life, and you cannot turn yourself in time again."

Percy wipes his tears and gets to his feet shakily. "I'm sorry."

"You cannot do that again."

“I’m sorry for you,” Percy clarifies. He inhales slowly and looks around him at the familiar dirty riverbank, gleaming and oily in the scarce moonlight. The fishy smell of the water lapping against the shore does very little to clear the scent of burning flesh from his nostrils—he knows without guessing that he will see that child in his dreams for the rest of his life and smell the stench of his death for the rest of his days—but he can focus on the familiarity of the river and desperately shove away his horror. “You said that this was your redemption. It’s a pretty shitty redemption, if you’re asking me.”

Severus looks at him incredulously before his face closes in, forbidding. “Excuse me?”

Percy waves his hand, encompassing the horror they had just left behind. “All of this. So you sold a secret to the Dark Lord. So Lily Evans died because of it. I imagine you did not know what impact your words would have, at the time. You turned spy for Dumbledore because of it. You had to redeem yourself—I understand that, Severus, trust me, I do—but I think your debt has been paid many times over.”

“My debt will never be paid,” says Severus quietly.

“That’s foolish.” Percy shakes his head, his throat still raw from the smoke and the scream and the tears, but the argument with Severus giving him something to anchor himself on. “You told Dumbledore about the prophecy, didn’t you? And he hid Lily and James under the Fidelius, and they would have been perfectly fine if they had trusted, say, McGonagall as their Secret Keeper instead of Pettigrew. It was a prophecy, Severus. If you had not told the Dark Lord, maybe it would not have come to pass, but if you had not told Dumbledore, Lily wouldn’t have had time to prepare.”

“She was not prepared to die, Weasley!” Severus exclaims tightly.

“Wasn’t she?” Percy risks, hearing the cry of this poor child as its death arrived without warning. Where was its mother? What would its mother have wanted to do, given the time? “She did something to Harry, Severus. She cast powerful blood wards over him; she had to have time to research those, and reason to believe that she would die, and love enough to want her death to protect her son. Those blood wards have been protecting him for the last fifteen years. Isn’t that what we think? And if Harry hadn’t survived that night, he wouldn’t be the Chosen One, and the Dark Lord wouldn’t be vulnerable.”

“But if I had said nothing at all—”

“But if you had said nothing, then what, Severus? The Order was losing the war! I know this, and you know this, and Dumbledore knows this. Why was the Order full of twenty year old wizards, even then? Because all the older ones were dead! I know what this war is going to look like in a year, let alone in five. Imagine if Harry *hadn’t* defeated the Dark Lord, and he would have continued growing in strength, unchecked. Imagine if Dumbledore had tried to face him, and lost. We would have all been lost, Severus. Your actions killed Lily Evans but think of how many years of peace we had in exchange. Now we have Harry, and he’s a

petulant teenager, but we know that in two year's time he does *something* and he kills the Dark Lord. I saw it myself. Do you really think Lily would have preferred the alternative? She would have been targeted anyway, for being such a brilliant Mudblood."

"*Do not say that word*," hisses Snape, and Percy flinches into silence.

He stares down at his muddy shoes, not wanting to risk Severus' ire. They are all the victims of fate, of circumstance, of their own inconsequential decisions. If Percy had been Sorted Ravenclaw, if he had not been accepted as Crouch's apprentice and instead worked with his father, if he had been less proud, if he had not made a joke right then as Fred stepped into that curse, if he had not opened that one book with the time ritual, if he had not befriended the Muggleborn librarian at the Library of Archives, if he had not had the courage to end his first life...everything would have been different, and who's to say he made the right choice?

When it becomes clear that Severus is not going to say anything, Percy clears his throat. He reaches inside his bag, the bookbag he keeps on him at all times. "I have something for you."

The shock on Severus' face is tinged red by the opulent sparkle of the Philosopher's Stone. Percy had retrieved it from Gringotts several days ago, planning on using it to create more gold, given his supply was nearly out. He hadn't planned to give it to Severus, but somehow this seems like the correct thing to do, and he says without hesitation, "I want you to have this, to protect you."

"You *snake*," says Severus, but with something closer to delight than to disparagement, if Percy squinted and examined the words closely. "You stole this right under Albus' nose, didn't you."

"All I ask in exchange is you give me some of the gold," says Percy, thrusting the Stone toward Severus.

Severus doesn't take it. "And how is this meant to keep me safe?"

"It confers immortality, I believe," says Percy, pushing himself to his feet. "I imagine it has several protective properties, and you're the best person to discover them."

"Percy," says Severus, slowly and clearly, "This is the *Philosopher's Stone.* You cannot just gift it to me, like a book you thought I may be interested in."

"Why not?" Percy protests. "I have no use for it, save that I am poor, particularly after giving so much money to Dumbledore. You are the Potions master; I would think you have the best chance of extracting value out of this."

Severus is clearly mesmerised by the Stone, by the subtle way it absorbs the meagre light and reflects it back to them. "And you do not worry I would be…tempted?"

"No," says Percy simply. "And if you are tempted by immortality, I reckon you deserve it, given you have spent two lifetimes already trying to earn your redemption."

This time Severus takes the Stone, carefully, and holds it as if it were a delicate egg. “Thank you,” he says fiercely, and Percy is taken aback by the strength of the other man's emotion. Then, more calmly, as if embarassed by his outburst, Severus clears his throat and posits, “But you are not interested in your own immortality?”

Percy thinks for a second about it, measures the weight of his two lifetimes against the concept of a third, and shakes his head. “I just want to live this life,” he admits. “But properly, without the Dark Lord. But you’re going to be in incredible danger over the next year, Severus. I want you to have this.”

“I have known my death is imminent for years,” Severus says quietly, securing the Stone away in his robes. “Your arrival and subsequent knowledge merely confirmed it.”

He does not continue, but Percy can fill in the gaps himself. Perhaps with the Stone, Severus can escape that fate, which Percy imagines is both a great and terrible idea to contemplate.

To spare him, Percy changes the topic. With each passing second, the smell of the river seems to clear the flames from his throat and nose, and he is able to think more clearly, as if the horror he had left behind had been a dream, and he'd awoken, gasping and sweating, into the safety of his bed. "I think Dumbledore has the Elder Wand. You need to defeat him, properly. We need to surprise him."

Severus is silent, and then to Percy’s surprise the other man lets out something that may be the beginnings of a grim laugh.

“We have to keep going, Severus,” Percy says, now parroting the other man’s words back to him. “Your redemption is done, believe it or not, but it will certainly be done when we kill the sick bastard. It’ll be easier with the Elder Wand.”

“Well, I am glad you have recovered from your shock,” Severus says dryly, and by mutual agreement they part ways without discussing the question of anyone’s redemption any further.

***

November 1996

But Percy doesn't recover quickly, not really. November brings with it more death and destruction, and Percy finds himself increasing the dosage of Dreamless Sleep that he takes, just to have a few hours without the smell of burning flesh in his nostrils as he sleeps fitfully in his small, cramped room. Scrimgeour's face grows lined and aged as the full burden of the war settles more solidly on his shoulders, and even Moody looks more tired than paranoid when Percy passes him in the halls.

In this timeline, Scrimgeour rises to the occasion much more than he had previously, or perhaps Percy is remembering the past incorrectly. Scrimgeour tries: forearms are checked at entrance (but when Percy hides his under a very strong concealing charm that he can only maintain for a few minutes at time, somehow the Dark Lord finds out, and forces Percy to teach the spell to the others), guards patrol the halls, everyone must complete a mandatory training in defence. He reorganises departments, publishes helpful pamphlets, and gives daily speeches where he provides updates on casualties and protective measures.

But none of it is enough. Voldemort gives his followers instructions only to cause chaos, and the lack of clear motive, the seemingly random nature of attack, the ubiquity of masked young men that are sighted at the scene all contribute to make it feel like the Ministry is fighting against a deadly smoke, impossible to catch in its fingers. Even when they do take prisoners, none of the prisoners know anything about the Dark Lord, save that they may have been recruited by a hooded Death Eater with a disguised voice. There are far more of these angry young wizards than there are Marked Death Eaters.

Because Percy is excluded from the Inner Circle meetings, he finds to his dismay he does not have much intelligence to pass to McGonagall. He can name the Marked Death Eaters, and he's learned quite a bit about the various attacks, but he frequently only learns about them after the fact. Whatever Severus knows is undoubtedly more useful than the gossip and rumour that Percy dutifully encodes with a clever charm he'd invented and sends via Cedric or Tonks to McGonagall.

Cedric shocks everyone by loudly criticising Dumbledore in the *Three Broomsticks*, in order to give himself an excuse to speak to Percy, and so they are actually able to grab tea every few weeks without drawing too much attention to themselves. Cedric is a wealthy, pureblooded wizard, and Barty's paranoia seemed to suggest he hadn't widely shared that he'd killed Cedric's father, so Percy is not even questioned about this friendship by the Dark Lord, nor any of his followers. Cedric seems to be taking Severus' instructions to *remind Percy of his purpose* quite literally, and Percy often finds himself speaking more candidly about his frustration with his continued estrangement with his family than he means to reveal.

(*"*Tell me about the Diggory boy," says Voldemort, interested, and Percy has to repress a shudder at the thought of Voldemort's frigid attention on Cedric's open, smiling face.

"He's only a Hufflepuff, and he's a bit dull," says Percy hastily, "but he certainly holds no love for Dumbledore. He's quite angry about Dumbledore pushing Potter to the forefront of the Triwizard Tournament and depriving Diggory of the chance to win fame and glory for himself."

"Perhaps you ought to cultivate him."

"I would be happy to, if that is what my Lord desires, but I do not think he will be a great addition to our ranks, my Lord.")

"Dumbledore's a bloody fool," Scrimgeour says bitterly one evening toward the middle of the month. He and Percy are, for once, alone in the dark and silent office. It is a sad day; two from their office were killed in a blast in Diagon Alley.

Percy grunts in agreement. He is writing two letters of condolences to their families, but the sheer senselessness of the incident—they'd been doing something *normal* for once, merely checking on the permits of the few remaining vendors in Diagon Alley—and had entirely by accident been caught in the explosion.

"I *know* he knows something," Scrimgeour gripes. "Something about Potter, something about You Know Who. I understand him needing to keep a secret to the public...but to *me?* The Minister? Why does he not trust me? The Muggle P.M.'s ringing our office, asking about all the Muggles that are disappearing, and I have to admit to him I don't know anything because a ruddy schoolmaster is holding his secrets too close to his chest."

"Dumbledore does not trust anyone."

"You say that as if it were admirable," Scrimgeour scoffs. "We are at war, and it is us versus them. Why does he spurn our help? We may have different methods but they are by no means incompatible. In fact, I would argue it is *good* for us to have different methods; why ought we put all our eggs in one nest?"

Percy hums in neutral agreement and scratches out a few more lines praising the Ministry employees for their heroics. "Why do you need him, sir?"

"Look around you, Weasley! We are dying every day! We do not know when he will attack, or why, or how. Whether Dumbledore or Potter is our generation's *Chosen One* remains to be seen, but either way we need one of them."

"Well, what do you actually need?" Percy presses as he signs his name beneath one letter and tries to work up the courage for the second. "Men? Wands? Money?"

"Information!" Scrimgeour thunders, so loudly that Percy checks nervously that the wards are still thrumming around them. "What is He doing? What does He want?"

"Chaos."

"He brings himself *back from the dead* to sow chaos in Britain?" Scrimgeour shakes his head. "He's planning something, Weasley."

Percy checks the wards again and then lowers his voice. "Well, you know he wants to infiltrate the Ministry. Why don't you infiltrate his ranks? You know the type of man he's recruiting."

"You think I have not tried?"

"Not a Death Eater, just someone on the outside who might be able to one day be on the inside."

"Weasley—"

"Or if you can't stop them from coming then at least make it harder for them to win," he continues doggedly. "Freeze any Death Eater or suspected Death Eater's vaults. Hide the instructions from one Minister to his successor. You know if He takes control then He'll target

the Muggleborns; try and get them to safety *now,* while we're still in charge. Once He takes over the Death Eaters will be everywhere openly; make a plan now for how we will track them back to the Dark Lord."

"You'll wash your hands of us so quickly?" Scrimgeour says gruffly.

"I am nothing if not pragmatic," says Percy dryly. Sometimes it feels like he is the only pragmatic one in the entire bloody Wizarding World. "Listen, Minister—we are lucky that the Dark Lord wants nothing more than to sow chaos right now. We need to *act.* We need to prepare for the worst."

Scrimgeour is silent for a long time, stroking his tawny beard and watching Percy struggle through the second letter. "The Dark Lord," he says finally.

"I'm sorry?"

"You call him the Dark Lord."

"I will not say his name," Percy says with a strained smile. "But to call him *You Know Who* seems…"

"The Dark Lord," repeats Scrimgeour. He shakes his head. He looks acutely as though he needs a glass of whiskey, something to take a long, pensive sip from before slamming the glass down on the table. "You're right. We're fooling ourselves to believe we'll win this war. Best we can do is die with grace."

"It is worth it to try, isn't it?" Percy asks quietly. "Even if you feel doomed to fail?"

Scrimgeour gives a heavy sigh and stands. He looks at Percy for a long moment as if he will reply, but after another gusty sigh all he does is walk away.

(But buried between item thirty-two and thirty-three on Percy's weekly list of tasks—a habit Scrimgeour started, which Fudge never would have even considered—he asks Percy to compile a list of *high risk individuals*. Percy stares at it, feeling cold. The Dark Lord would want this list. He would likely kill Percy, if he knew Percy made this list for the Minister, but did not report it. But he can't help himself; he has to make the list, because if the Minister has not given up, then he will respect that, if he can).

The ranks of the Ministry are thinning anyway. There are less dangerous professions. Even if Scrimgeour is publicly unwilling to admit that they are losing the war, most of the population can read the signs.

What will the Dark Lord *do* when he has the Ministry at His command, when Harry Potter is finally vanquished? What will He do when all of the Muggleborns have been killed, and His hordes of Snatchers are baying for blood? How will He fill his days? Will he spread His oily reach over the rest of the continent, will He refuse to stop until He has conquered the entire world?

“It makes me nervous, the waiting,” he overhears one of his coworkers muttering to another. “It’s like he’s toying with us.”

Perhaps the Dark Lord is using the time for something, but even Tom cannot explain precisely *what*. He spends hours seemingly alone in Malfoy Manor completing complex rituals.

“Elemental magic,” Tom says shortly, his face pale and drawn. “He’s killing us. He thinks the earth will give him power, but He’s killing us, the bloody fool. He’s scared of something, but I don’t know what. Surely it’s not the Potter boy.”

(Every time Percy goes back to Malfoy Manor, the heavy taint of the Dark Lord’s magic is stronger).

Percy takes his own advice and arranges his affairs in order. His will, of course, has laid securely in the Prewett vault since he was seventeen. He takes out as much gold as he thinks he can afford without raising the ire of Aunt Muriel—particularly since Severus manages to slip him a heavy pouch of gold.

He writes a list of explicit instructions and leaves vials of memories for his family members, in case they need to complete the task if he dies. He purchases large amounts of Potions ingredients and casts strong preserving charms on them; he purchases large numbers of Healing potions and saves them in unbreakable vials; and he purchases three well-provisioned wizarding tents and places them in different locations for emergency use. The next weekend, Percy spends what would almost be an *enjoyable* few hours with Tonks, assembling emergency kits to distribute to the members of the Order, if it were not for the grim urgency that underlies each action.

Establishing a network of safe houses, Percy finds, is precisely the type of task he enjoys; complicated and precise, each with a set of specific opportunities and challenges to consider for optimal success. The Order must buy or otherwise take control of a series of houses in both Muggle and Wizarding neighbourhoods, outfit each with the proper equipment, and establish each as a distinct but connected entity. Percy flatly refuses to use Fidelius, which he thinks will be too rigid for their purposes; far better for one or two houses to fall due to insufficient protections than for the whole operation to end because some idiot Secret Keeper gets himself killed in the war. He personally enchants a series of portkeys, which Moody assigns to a squad of his own to provision as needed. Each allows access only to their chosen house, and none of the houses have any sort of identifying information to link to another. Each house also includes instructions on how to create an international Portkey, though they do not suggest where the occupants of the house may try and flee. Better to not have an established route to disrupt.

It is not *too* difficult to perform these actions under the close watch of Yaxley, assigned to shadow him at the Ministry, though Percy is careful to only go to Headquarters when Tom is away. Percy has invented an entire fake girlfriend to explain his absences, a witch loosely based off of an amalgamation of Myrtle and Penny (though pureblooded, of course) but Tom never asks. Percy tries not to be hurt that Tom does not seem to notice where Percy is when he is not in his flat. Really, he ought to be relieved. Still.

The Dark Lord is away for much of November, which provides a necessary cooling relief after the sharp burn of Samhain. Even Yaxley seems a little rattled in the weeks that follow the carnage. Yaxley is a slick, smarmy looking fellow with long white hair and a long, pointed nose, a clear imitation of Lucius Malfoy, though one with undeniably less presence. Percy thinks that Yaxley might be able to capitalise on his ability to fade into the background, except that Yaxley so clearly wishes to be in the thick of things that he shoulders himself into the forefront at every opportunity.

Certainly he enjoys nosing around Scrimgeour's office, bringing Percy "lunch" and interrogating him openly about the movements of the Minister. Percy allows this, partially because he often is unable to procure lunch himself, and Yaxley brings him food packed by his house elf, rather than the cheap Ministry meals that once provided so much reassurance to Percy (and that he now hates fervently), and partially because Percy knows perfectly well that Yaxley reports back to the Dark Lord at every opportunity. Scrimgeour has noticed Yaxley too, but many people seem to think plying Percy with gifts is an appropriate way to spy on the Minster, and so Percy doubts Scrimgeour pays Yaxley particular attention.

Percy obediently reports on Scrimgeour's movements, or at least the more public ones, and adds in a few derogatory comments about Scrimgeour as a blood traitor, incompetent sod, etc. as the occasion merits. He does mention Scrimgeour's feud with Dumbledore, which seems to interest either Yaxley or the Dark Lord, given as Yaxley asks him eagerly for updates on it at every opportunity.

Percy does not have much to report on that front, though he winds elaborate stories out of it anyway, highlighting that Scrimgeour seems too cowardly to make any moves without Dumbledore's approval, and Dumbledore seems to take pleasure in blocking Scrimgeour, secure in his arrogant view that he does not need the Minister of Magic to win the war. Tom enjoys hearing these stories too, when he's around, so Percy has a suspicion so will the Dark Lord.

On Christmas, Percy is forced to return to the Burrow by a persistent Scrimgeour, who does not seem willing to listen to Percy's explanations that he is estranged from his family.

"They are all Dumbledore's," Percy says clearly and deliberately to the Minister, already planning how he will explain this to Yaxley. Percy operates off the assumption that the Dark Lord will learn nearly everything about what Percy does in public (that is, everywhere except Headquarters and in the privacy of his own flat), and so often preemptively admits to fault to avoid being caught in a deception. "They will not help you, and they most certainly will not help *me*. I promise you that."

"Worth a shot," Scrimgeour says gruffly. "I want to meet the little boy hero, anyway. See what kind of man he is."

That'll be Percy's angle too, he decides. Surely the Dark Lord can't fault him for wanting to see how Harry Potter turns out.

This goes just about the same way it does the first time, save that Molly is decidedly cool to him and does not run after him, crying. He supposes this helps him avoid an uncomfortable scene, but he does miss the days when his mother cared about his happiness.

(His father, on the other hand, lays his hand on his shoulder and invites him to stay for supper. Percy refuses on principle, though the sight of his father shocks him. He is thin and wan, looking far worse than he did the previous time Percy sighted him, and his hair has turned almost entirely white. Is it the remnants of the venom? Is it...Percy's life ward? His stomach turns coldly with the thought).

Back home, Percy collapses on the couch after preparing himself a gin and tonic. He does not drink alcohol really ever, but he thinks such a terrible Christmas warrants at least one glass. Enchanting the wireless to play Celestina Warback—he ignores the small voice in his head that wants to cry at the thought of what he is doing—he pulls out his notebook to wish Severus a Happy Christmas.

He pauses after flipping to the page he uses to talk to Severus. He's barely communicated with the other man since Samhain—Severus had left the pouch of gold in Regulus' room but not included a note—but Percy has grown frustrated. He has but a few friends his own physical age, and then Severus around his own mental age, and then McGonagall and Aunt Muriel. He cannot afford to let awkwardness ruin one of those precious relationships.

Happy Christmas, Severus. I hope you can eke out a measure of calm today.

He closes the notebook, not expecting a reply, but later on, when Percy is sitting in front of the empty portrait and debating making himself another drink, the notebook grows warm in his pocket.

Happy Christmas, Percy.

Percy gapes at the spiky handwriting, feeling absurdly like he wants to take a photograph. Then, more words appear.

Not bloody likely. Yours?

Terrible, Percy writes back quickly. *S. brought me to the Burrow. Mum looked like she wanted to kill me herself. Dad is looking really ill.*

The venom?

I hope not.

I will try and contrive a reason to see him.

This makes Percy feel even warmer than the sight of his given name in Severus' handwriting. Perhaps he has not lost the other man's respect. Perhaps he has even gained a friend, as ludicrous as the idea is to contemplate.

DECEPTION (3/4)

Chapter Notes

> I'm glad you all liked the Dementor! I almost took out that scene and then I decided to leave it in.

CHAPTER TEN: DECEPTION (3/4)

1996 — 1997 (Percy is 20 & 33, Severus is 35, Harry is 16, and Dumbledore has one year left to live)

January 1997

A few days before the spring term begins, Severus informs him that McGonagall plans to be at Headquarters to "check in on him." Percy has not had the chance to speak to her since their tense meeting last summer, so he supposes it's for the best, though his stomach curls uncomfortably at the thought. He had been rash, last time, to put her on Dumbledore's scent. What if her investigation yielded something Percy was not ready to explain, or put Dumbledore on the defence? What if Dumbledore successfully waylaid her, and now she will have even less cause to trust him?

But when he nervously arrives in Regulus' room, dressed in those same maroon robes that Auntie Muriel bought for him, he finds that her primary objective seemed to be merely to ascertain that he is well.

"Severus would be able to inform you of my continued health," he tells her, feeling a bit bewildered.

McGonagall sniffs at him from where she has settled herself behind Regulus' desk. "Severus would say you were well so long as you were alive."

Percy snaps his mouth shut only a second before he points out that being alive is all they can ask for in these dark times. She gives him an arch look and enacts a cleaning charm with more force than is necessary on the desk. Percy sneezes as a cloud of dust dissipates into the air. He cleans the room regularly, he *does*, but something about the Black family manor seems to encourage incessant griminess. Percy cannot imagine his mother existing in such a dirty, oppressive place for very long; no wonder she moved back to the Burrow, Fidelius be damned.

Once they are able to skirt past the conversation minefield that small talk begets these days, Percy finds himself opening his mouth and telling her about his sessions with the Dementors.

He does not tell her why he is so hell-bent on finding his soul, and she does not ask. Perhaps she has learned that he has reason for his secrets, or perhaps she, like he, is relieved to have an academic question to ponder, rather than one of morality.

She eagerly accepts his theory that the best way to scry for one's own soul, as nebulous as an idea that may be, is to first attempt the Animagus transformation, though she does remind him that he is still a magical creature, insofar as his magical core remains with him, even as he changes into a lynx.

"But certainly your magic is more remote," she agrees thoughtfully, transforming her hand into a paw and flexing it, much like she did all those years ago, when he first was learning the same. The sudden loss of those days sparks in his chest, and he has to look away for a long second to collect himself. Then McGonagall continues, "What have you previously tried?"

"I've been focusing on the transformation," says Percy, relieved to be brought firmly back to the present. "Trying to identify the moment where my magic acts as the transformative force, and I become an anchor for the Transfiguration."

McGonagall hums thoughtfully. "I suppose," she says slowly. A second later, her hand is back to human. "But I would argue that the transformation involves the most amount of magic, and therefore may not be optimal for scrying for your soul, insofar as such an act is possible. I would focus instead on practising your meditations, the same ones we tried when you were searching for your form."

"Why?" Percy asks dubiously.

McGonagall gives him a sideways glance, sensing the doubt in his tone. "It is not called the *Soul-Seek spell* for nothing, Mr. Weasley. Recall our basic Animagus theory. Your Animagus form is fixed; there has never been a documented case of an Animagus form changing, though a Patronus is quite the opposite. Thus we conclude that an Animagus form displays something core to our sense of self, something immutable. We utilise our magic to provide the transformative force for us to provide these core tenants an animal form, but we do not prescribe the form, we seek knowledge of it, as it already exists within us."

"So it's different than the Occlumency magic," Percy says, picturing his mental library in his head. "Part of my Occlumency shields seem to emerge organically, but part of them are planned, and all are mutable."

"I must say, I am glad, given your current position, that you did not give up your restricted studies into Occlumency," McGonagall says with a sigh, shaking her head. She looks around the room, her attention caught by the smattering of tacked up articles on the Dark Lord. "Regulus was quite a clever boy," she admits. "I think he would have enjoyed Transfiguration more if Sirius and James were not so clearly talented at the art."

Percy, for all that he knows that McGonagall has worked at Hogwarts for decades, often forgets that she taught all of these names in the history books, and that she attended school with Tom Riddle himself. It throws into sharp contrast Voldemort's bizarre, corrupted form. McGonagall is an older witch, but she is still powerful and likely as knowledgeable in her chosen fields than Tom is in his. Why did he feel so intently he must pursue alternate, almost

fabled forms of power rather than merely succeeding in the arenas already available to him? "Were you surprised when he joined the Death Eaters?"

McGonagall purses her wrinkled lips together and looks back at Regulus' desk, the dejection written clearly across the green fabric of her robes as they settle around her thin shoulders. "In truth, no, though I of course hoped he may find an alternate path. Nearly all of the talented young Slytherins for a terrible series of years joined the Death Eaters, particularly those that were young heirs with something to prove, or those who were heirs of nothing, like Severus."

"Severus told me his father was a Muggle," says Percy carefully.

"Yes, and his mother a rather uninspired witch, Merlin rest her soul. Eileen Prince. How she and that Muggle produced one of the finest minds of his generation—Severus had to overcome much," McGonagall says quietly, tracing the grain of the wood with her finger. "He was an unpleasant boy, but I thought perhaps his friendship with Lily would save him from the Death Eaters, though of course after he called her a Mudblood in front of the entire school, his fate was all but sealed. Lily was not particularly forgiving. It's a wonder she ever forgave James for his relentless teasing of her. I wonder if she would have forgiven Severus, in time."

Severus had called Lily a Mudblood—and in front of the entire school?

"*Do not say that word*," Snape's voice echoes in Percy's head, and he flinches again, like he had then.

"And then the horrors of the first war; I was one of the only people who knew Severus was a spy," McGonagall continues, her voice soft, clearly lost in thought. "I tried to help him, though of course I was no healer. Luckily Poppy got involved as well. Severus had no choice but to join the staff. That first year he trembled so much from the after-effects of the Cruciatus that Poppy had him dosed for nearly all his classes. He didn't so much as touch a stirrer for a year after that, though he got all of his students through the OWLs and NEWTs." McGonagall shakes her head again. "He's not a particularly *good* teacher, but he is determined."

Percy can't quite suppress a snort at this, thinking of his own sessions with Severus, where the other man had beat a basic understanding of Potions theory into his head through sheer force of will. For the first time, it occurs to Percy that perhaps Severus had an inkling that igniting Percy's competitive spirit—not to mention giving him something to anchor a healthy dose of spite on—would be the correct approach to take with him.

The snort seems to break McGonagall out of whatever reverie she'd mentioned, and Regulus' chair creaks as McGonagall turns again to face him. "Try the meditations," she orders him, "and the emulsions, if you have the ability to make them. Call your soul back to you, but while you are in your form, so as to satisfy your magical instinct to call your form to you."

Percy nods hastily, though the rest of their session is not particularly productive, given that both of their minds are elsewhere, with the same grumpy, irascible man, and the horrors he'd experienced both then and now.

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January rivals October for Percy's least favourite month of the year. It is so bitterly cold and windy each day; even layered warming charms are insufficient against the biting chill. Percy endures the weather grumpily and snaps irritably when Julian forgets to cast a Warming Charm on the tea that he brings Percy each morning.

The news of the month is that Death Eaters tried to murder Scrimgeour, apparently. Percy privately has his doubts—why would he not hear about it, if the Dark Lord ordered an attack on Scrimgeour?—but he supposes that some may have been acting independently. The attack, nevertheless, rattles Scrimgeour: he creates a detailed plan of succession, commissions an extra two Aurors to guard him at all times, and, he confides later to Percy, he purposely "loses" the instructions for changing the Ministry wards in the Department of Archives.

"It's filed under cauldron regulation," Scrimgeour tells Percy in an undertone. Percy has to forcibly hide a smirk. "Most boring thing I could think of. At least this way the bastards won't be able to redirect the Floo or trigger the anti-Apparation wards again."

He also tells his Aurors to aim to kill or stun, not merely disarm, when they see a Death Eater, even a suspected one. He passes an emergency decree to authorise his office to use Veritaserum to interrogate prisoners, which Percy feels obliged to point out would bite him if he were to lose power.

"I set it to expire once I leave office," he says dismissively to this concern. "We got to get them *now*, Weasley."

The side effect to this decree is that Scrimgeour manages to obtain a fairly accurate list of who all of the Marked Death Eaters are. Luckily Percy has never attended one of the larger gatherings unmasked, but he feels increasingly nervous as the list that Scrimgeour carries around grows with each interrogation. He orders Gringotts to freeze their accounts and organises searches of their property; as a result, Tom grumbles to him one night, Malfoy Manor is crawling with rich purebloods with nowhere else to go.

This is going to force the Dark Lord's hand, Severus warns.

He cannot be stopped, Percy defends himself. *He's determined to "die with grace," as he puts it.*

Idiot.

The Dark Lord lashes back by burning down half of Diagon Alley, which Percy privately thinks is an idiotic move. Why destroy the society you hope to one day lead?

"If only there was someone to *negotiate* with," Scrimgeour grumbles often.

Only a fourth, tops, of Percy's attention is concentrated on the Ministry. He divides the remainder of his time between continuing to contribute his talent for *minutiae*, as McGonagall calls it, toward the Order—unbelievable, the Order does not have even the most basic security measures, like confirming each other's identities when they meet—with researching the wards around Gringotts and the complicated social structure of the goblins, just in case they will need to somehow break in or coerce the goblins into helping him. He practises his Animagus meditations at night, curled as a lynx in the centre of his bed, but there's still *something* he's missing, something he can't quite put a finger (or a paw) on. Lastly, he's begun to examine the life ward he made for Arthur, his father's ill face top of mind. It does not *seem* to be broken, but considering that Percy basically made up the ritual on the spot, it's surprisingly hard to tell.

Three weeks pass and his father feels no better. Severus "accidentally" bumps into him at Grimmauld Place and reports back to Percy.

Someone seems to be leeching off his magic. Perhaps at the Ministry?

I'm investigating it, but I do not see who could be affecting his magic like that...or why. My father is not a particularly powerful wizard.

Tom is useful, as he knows far more about life wards than Percy. Some of his aggression from the previous months seems to bleed away; instead of pacing angrily back and forth in his portrait like a tiger, he is almost like his sixteen year old self again, content to dive into wild explorations of magical theory with Percy, lobbing lofty insults and revealing his razor sharp mind. It is as if being around the Dark Lord is a stabilising influence on Tom. Percy hopes it is not the same for the Dark Lord.

"I think in my kingdom you shall be my chief researcher," Tom says to him one chilly evening, the remnants of a laugh still lingering on his lips.

Percy sweeps him a low bow. "I would be honoured, my Lord."

"Although you are utterly failing to find either of my Horcruxes," the portrait says lightly.

"You were too clever in hiding them, my Lord. Dumbledore's little Order uses the Black family mansion for their meeting place, and Severus searched the place from top to bottom. I believe that you discovered his perfidy and took the locket back. I cannot imagine that someone as insignificant as Regulus Black hid such a large secret from you successfully."

Tom looks pensive. "You are likely correct. I will raise it with *Him*."

"And you guard the Malfoys too well. Severus reports you hardly let either out of your sight, though if we could get in touch with Narcissa, we may be able to utilise her. She is more… pragmatic than Lucius."

"Abraxas was a fine wizard," Tom says wistfully. "It saddens me that his son disappoints me so, though it sounds as though his grandson is more worthy of his name."

Tom is quiet while Percy bends back over the portrait of his father. The portrait is not truly alive, but it thrums with magic nevertheless, and Percy is trying to run a series of diagnostic spells on the life-ward that will reveal something other than that the portrait is made of paint and canvas.

“Find me a victim,” Tom finally orders. “Someone on whom I can practise my possession. I grow tired of waiting, Percy. I can find my Horcruxes myself, if I had a body.”

Percy freezes very slowly, like ice creeping up a fountain as a Dementor glides past. “A victim?”

“At least a half-blood, preferably. One that is not too important; I may kill him the first time, which is why I shan’t risk you. That should be simple for you, wouldn’t it?”

“I am watched very carefully, both by the Minister and by yourself, my Lord,” Percy attempts to demur. “I cannot be seen killing half-bloods.”

Tom waves his hand. “He can be a pathetic half-blood, one that nobody misses. The body matters not. It is merely a vessel; I will provide the power.”

Percy bites his lower lip, but he has no choice but to say yes, does he?

We must destroy the portrait, Severus writes later that night when Percy updates him on Tom’s demand.

We still do not know the fifth or sixth Horcrux!

We do not know that the portrait knows either. He has confirmed the locket and the cup; perhaps we can make another portrait once we obtain one of the two.

Just give me some more time to talk to him.

“Tom, do you think Regulus would have deeded the locket to somebody? Do you have any family heirlooms? What would you have done?”

“I will not die,” says Tom simply. “So I need not concern myself with wills and the like. But it is a good idea to check with the Black line of heritage, particularly if the Black boy knew he would soon die.”

Percy takes a bite of his meal. “I wish I had family heirlooms,” he says longingly. “The best I have is an ugly old goblin tiara. I bet the Gaunt family has fantastic items full of magic and history and power. I bet you have one of the lowest Gringotts vaults.”

Tom smiles serenely. “The Gaunt family is one of the oldest, but I admit, I was never particularly interested in the vault,” he says, which Percy instinctively takes to mean that he did not know of the vault’s existence. “I prefer to create my own heirlooms.”

“You never thought to use the Founder’s Artefacts for their own power?”

“Why do I need their power, when I have mine?”

By February, his father is in bed nearly all of the time, and he summons his three eldest sons to his side. Even Charlie Floos in from Romania, clutching a letter penned in their father's shaky hands. Percy risks it to attend the meeting as well, figuring he will be able to explain it if he really needs to do so.

"The Healers believe I have under a year remaining," Arthur tells them somberly. Bill sniffs hard at the news, his eyes already red-rimmed and brimming with tears. Charlie is more composed, but he leans his broad shoulders into Percy and says nothing. "I do not wish to tell your younger siblings yet."

"There is truly nothing we can do?" Charlie asks, his voice steady.

"My magic is failing me," their father says, looking down at his hands. "But do not mourn me, boys. I had a good life, a happy life, and if I must die after helping to bring down You Know Who, then I am proud of my death."

Bill leans forward and grips Arthur's hand tightly. "We will make you proud, Dad," he vows, voice thick with tears.

Percy does not feel mournful; he feels angry, cheated, and entirely unwilling to give up. "I'm looking into it," he snaps. "Magic does not just *turn* on you, Father. There must be a reason."

"Oh, Perce," Arthur sighs. "Sometimes life has no reason. That is what makes it so delightful —and so challenging."

Later, the three brothers sit in the darkened living room, not meeting each other's eyes.

"I can't believe it," says Bill for the eleventh time, shaking his head. "You know your parents will die one day, but it seems so *soon*."

"He never should have joined the Order," Charlie says darkly. "What good was it to guard the prophecy anyway? I read in the *Prophet* it was stolen from the Hall anyway during the Night of the Dementors."

"Dumbledore should have protected him," contributes Percy in agreement.

Charlie runs a hand through his short, curly hair and looks to Percy. "I want to help."

"With what?"

"With anything. I know you're in the thick of it, Perce." Charlie leans forward. "If Dad's going to die for this Order, then I want to make sure it was worth it. Let's bring the bastard down."

Bill shifts uncomfortably, whether at the insinuation that Percy is more *in the thick of it* than him, or at the hoarse, angry tenor to Charlie's voice, but does not interrupt. Percy has been too busy to stage a dramatic conflict with his family, though he will probably have to do it soon. His younger siblings seem content to believe he has turned entirely to the Dark side, but his older brothers still regard him with a measure of trust.

Charlie is powerful at magic, but no more than Bill, and certainly not Percy. He does not have too many useful contacts, at least in Britain. Abroad, however...and Charlie *can* fly...Percy thinks about it for a long minute and then nods decisively. “If I were part of the Order—and I have no plans to join the Order—I would want to evacuate as many people as possible,” he says carefully. “I would perhaps consider that the Dark Lord will begin the purges as soon as he takes over the Ministry, and by the looks of it, he’s getting impatient. Britain may not be safe for them.”

“Why won’t you join the bloody Order?” Bill asks in frustration. “We’re all in it.”

“I cannot join anything run by Dumbledore so openly,” Percy says truthfully. “But if I were in it, I would perhaps reach out to McGonagall.”

Charlie nods slowly, repeatedly, as the idea warms to him. “We can take them by broom,” he says, “Portkeys. Not the Floo, I reckon. Nothing that can be traced. Maybe even Muggle transport?”

“I’ll help,” says Bill. “I’ve been feeling useless. Ron’s somehow in the thick of it, and Fred and George are making all those shielding cloaks and eavesdropping lines. Fleur’s been telling me that she’s been reaching out to the Veela community, trying to drum up some support, but they don’t want to fight. Maybe they’ll take in some refugees.”

Charlie and Percy exchange a look. “And who is *Fleur*?” Charlie asks, dragging the name out playfully.

Bill flushes a deep crimson. “My girlfriend. Well, soon to be fiancée, but you lads can’t mention it to anyone.”

“After tonight I do not think I will see you both again for a very long time,” Percy says quietly. He looks up and meets their eyes, one set at a time. “Do not think the worst of me as this year continues, but continue to think quite poorly of me, do you understand?”

Charlie looks confused, but Bill nods steadily at him. “I’ll loudly proclaim how much I hate you, if that helps. And you shan’t be invited to the wedding. Although with Dad so ill, maybe we should try and have the wedding sooner...although I have to *ask* Fleur first…but I can't imagine she'll say no...”

Percy shakes his head decisively. “Dad’s not going to die, Bill. Not yet. I won’t let him.”

Death is on everyone’s mind, it seems. Severus tells Percy tiredly that Dumbledore has begun to plan in earnest for his death, though Severus has been unable to get Draco to trust him enough to confide his plan for breaking into Hogwarts. Given that Percy knows only the date, and not the method, he feels a bit guilty that Severus has to play these games with Draco.

“The boy’s taught himself enough Occlumency that I can’t just break into his mind,” Severus grumbles during one of the rare times they are able to coordinate a meeting at Headquarters. Percy winces again from his position on Regulus’ bed; that was most likely his fault too. “Albus has assembled his will and left me instructions to remain Headmaster of Hogwarts

under any means necessary. He's been giving Potter private lessons all year, though he won't share with me what he's sharing with *him*."

"Probably news of the Horcruxes," says Percy thoughtfully. Then, "So Dumbledore seems properly convinced he's going to have to die?"

"He's given me a copy of his will and informed me that I will be able to communicate with his portrait after he dies," Severus confirms, giving Percy a look out of the corner of his eyes. "You thought he may be trying to avoid death? Let me assure you that not even Albus Dumbledore will be able to escape the fatal effects of the cursed ring he placed on his finger, nor the effect of my Unbreakable Vow. No, Albus will die, and soon."

"Well, it's just…" Percy begins and then stops short as something occurs to him. He'd assumed that Dumbledore was collecting the Hallows for his own use, but perhaps Dumbledore had something else in mind.

Power the Dark Lord knows not…

"He's going to give Harry the Deathly Hallows," breathes Percy, his eyes wide. "In the hopes that they'll keep Harry alive long enough to count."

"I've examined Dumbledore's wand, when I was able," Severus says slowly. "It is indeed made of elder wood, though I do not take that to be definitive proof that it is the wand in the legends. Nor do I think we can assume that the Hallows *do* confer immortality. The Hallows are meant to allow the owner to cheat death, but not necessarily evade it forever. All three brothers die."

"But perhaps they will allow Harry to cheat death just long enough to fulfil the prophecy," Percy points out. "Or at least, give him a fighting chance. There was a period at the Battle of Hogwarts where Harry feigned death, you know. Hagrid carried him in, and we all thought he was dead, and then he leaped out of Hagrid's arms as right as rain. Perhaps the Deathly Hallows allow you to imitate death."

"Like the Draught of Living Death, but a controlled ability," muses Severus, which Percy knows means that Severus is taking his suggestion seriously. "It could be, I suppose. I suppose this means I will need to let Potter defeat me in a duel? Perhaps that is what kills me, in the end, given I do not think the Dark Lord will keep me alive if I allowed Potter to best me."

Percy waves aside this sardonic comment. "But maybe *Draco* can get the wand," he says thoughtfully. "Harry can certainly beat Draco in a duel, or at least have more of a fighting chance. If *you* duelled him, chances are that you'd have to let him win, and that wouldn't be a true victory."

Severus waves this aside. "We cannot fall into conjecture, as we do not know very much about the Hallows. I wanted to speak to you about the Stone while we had the time."

"Have you figured out how to make the Elixir of Immortality?" Perhaps when this is all over, Percy will figure out one of the myriad of ways to make himself immortal. Hallows,

Horcruxes, and Philosopher's Stones; it's a wonder that immortality is not more common in the Wizarding World. Although, as he thinks about living through his life *again,* he cannot quite say if to be immortal would be a luxury or a burden.

Severus shakes his head, some of his lanky hair falling into his face. "I do not believe the Elixir of Immortality exists. I have been examining the Potions theory carefully. The Stone does not have many of the requisite properties to confer immortality, or even prolonged age."

Percy blinks, taken aback. "Really? But Nicholas Flamel is still alive."

Severus nods slowly, as if considering his next words carefully. "I believe that may be a falsehood, perpetuated by Flamel, or his descendents."

"Oh." Percy leans back on the bed, feeling curiously disheartened.

"Yes." Severus pushes his hair out of his face and then turns to look at Percy. "Percy, you know that I will almost certainly die in under two year's time."

Percy's body tenses before he can stop it, the blankets rustling loudly underneath his legs. "You don't know that, Severus."

"For all of our interventions in the timeline, much is occurring on schedule," Severus says carefully. "We have achieved great progress, and I believe if we continue, we stand to defeat the Dark Lord without incurring as heavy bloodshed as we did in your original timeline. But Albus still brought death upon himself, and we could not have prevented it."

"I saved Cedric," says Percy, stubbornly.

"Cedric Diggory is far less important to the Dark Lord than I." Severus makes a gesture as if to stand and cross to Percy, and then settles himself back in his chair. "I believe I see how it will happen. I will murder Albus, since Draco will not be able to stomach it. You saw his initiation; he could not even kill a stranger, let alone his Headmaster. The Dark Lord will grow jealous or suspicious of me, particularly once I am installed as the Headmaster of Hogwarts, his preferred area to control."

"But *you* said he asked you to kill Dumbledore—"

"—and one day, he will either learn of the Elder Wand and kill me for it, or he'll find I am too powerful and kill me to prevent me from challenging him, or he will order me to do something I am unwilling to do, and kill me for refusing. In truth I never expected to live out the rest of this war, Weasley, even before you came along."

Percy stands, shaking his head. The thought of Severus *dying*, after all of this, and because Tom is too *jealous* or *insecure* or *stubborn* to allow Severus to exist alive in the same universe as him, and because *Percy* can't keep Severus bloody well alive, like he couldn't keep Fred, and he can't keep his dad, and Merlin knows who else he can't keep alive. "Shut up, Severus."

(“Could you kill him? If you had to?” Myrtle asks, floating in front of him, and Percy does not meet her gaze.)

“Weasley,” says Severus, and there is pity in the even way he says the syllables. “You ought not to mourn me.”

“Just *shut up.*” Percy says savagely. He pushes himself off the bed, takes three quick steps to the desk, where he has a tremendous urge to punch Severus in his sallow, hopeless face, and scoops up the bundle of gold that Severus had brought for him. “You’re not allowed to die and leave me here alone, do you understand that? I won’t let you.”

“Percy—” starts Severus, and his goddamn *sympathy* is too much for Percy to bear, and he Apparates himself roughly away.

He regrets it, of course he does, standing in the middle of his flat, the portrait on his wall empty, and the portrait of his father looking up at him curiously without a spark of intelligence in his painted blue eyes. He regrets it, but he does not go back, at least not until his chest has stopped heaving and his eyes have stopped stinging with unshed tears, but by the time Percy sheepishly Apparates back into Regulus’ room, it is long empty, with a smattering of dust over all of the surfaces, thoughtfully cast by Severus to mask the fact that either of them were ever there. Somehow, solving this mystery of why the room is so perpetually grimy does not bring Percy any relief.

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Once upon a time, Percy confiscated a series of suspicious looking trinkets from Neville Longbottom, increasingly noxious and dangerous ingredients hastily spelled together by various enterprising Hogwarts students (or perhaps Hogsmeade vendors, Percy had not asked how Neville had obtained them at the time).

Now, the types of things that Percy uses to try and induce a successful meditation in his lynx form would put Neville to shame. He tries all the normal infusions—lizard’s blood and diluted doxy venom, various mushrooms with unpronounceable names and lurid yellow spots, ground crystals and damp moss gently collected from the base of large oak trees, precisely at midnight—but none of them still the racing thoughts in his head and the erratic beating of his heart, made all the worse by his lynx form, which does not enjoy sitting placidly in his bed where there is danger lurking at every corner.

He winds up vomiting into his toilet more than once, barely able to make it back to his human form before he curls himself raggedly against the cool porcelain toilet. His mirror has long since been spelled silent, so there is no sound in his bathroom except for his hoarse breaths and the soft drip of sweat as it drops from his forehead onto the tiled floor. But Percy would not be Percy Weasley if he were not determined. He would not be Percy Weasley if he were scared of a few Potions ingredients and the great unknown. He twisted himself back through time, not once, but twice. He has the Dark Lord’s mark branded on his skin

(whispering to him, sometimes, in the middle of the night when he cannot sleep) and an apprenticeship offer from Minerva McGonagall. He knows everything he could conceivably have learned about soul magic, and he *will* find his own soul if it kills him.

(***No Patronus, Percy?*** Tom asks slyly, and Percy bares his teeth in rage. He's stopped trying. Perhaps his soul is too dark, now. Perhaps he went right ahead and ripped his soul in half with the two deaths that weigh on his conscience, and that is why he cannot seek his soul, why he cannot call it to him like his magic. Perhaps he's nearly killed himself, and not even made any Horcruxes out of the process. He can see the appeal, sometimes. If he *has* to kill, he might as well eek a measure of protection out of the process, right?)

The problem is that he can't figure out how to *not* use his magic. Much like his second first year, where even saying the spells obediently with the rest of the class caused the feather on his desk to flutter, Percy feels his magic in everything he does. It sparks around his fingers and curls lazily in the curve of his shoulder and nestles in the joints of his long, lanky legs. He feels his magic in every breath he takes, in every heartbeat that carries blood through his body. Even as a lynx, he feels it, sitting behind the nape of his neck, ready to be called on if needed to bring him back to human form. He feels his magic when he walks around in the Ministry, feels it assess the magic of everyone he passes, feels it asserting dominance quietly, insidiously, carefully, just as Tom taught him.

But Percy's not sure that he's ever felt his soul, except that he feels that damned *something* existing somewhere in the space between his magic and his self, unless it's all in his head and he's all but gone crazy, which seems more plausible with every passing day.

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March 1997

Facing the Dark Lord never seems to get easier. Percy tries to breathe slowly and evenly, but he feels what he's begun to recognize as the physical manifestations of his reaction to the Dark Lord's magic: sweat prickling down his back, a dry, unbrushed taste in his mouth, and of course that inexorable hum of tainted elemental magic ringing in his ears.

The Dark Lord is not happy, which means that he's *Crucioed* more than one Death Eater already, most recently the newly freed Lucius Malfoy, based on yet another disappointing letter for Draco. Percy watches Lucius pant on the floor, his long silver locks matted, and reflects that for Lucius probably the greater shame is that the entire Outer Circle of Death Eaters—now numbering fifty two, including thirteen Marked with one of Percy's circlets—heard the Dark Lord read out Draco's letter in a mocking tone.

Why the Dark Lord himself cannot enter Hogwarts, why the Dark Lord himself has participated in no Muggle torture after Samhain, why the Dark Lord himself has nothing to update, are all questions that nobody dares to even think. Thinking too loudly in the presence of the Dark Lord can literally be death-defying. Percy carefully turns his attention over to an

admiration of Malfoy Manor, of the great chandelier hanging above. He used to try to diplomatically admire the snake, but knowing now that Nagini may be killing his father, he cannot bring himself to even look at the wretched thing.

"We will take the Ministry the month after we take Hogwarts," Voldemort says, finally tiring of the hoarse, choked way Lucius tries to muffle his screams. "We will need...volunteers."

Instantly, a low murmur breaks out. Percy stays quiet, watching how the Inner Circle reacts. Their faces remain carefully impassive; they had known this was the plan.

Percy had not known this was the plan. Had Severus? Percy does not do anything as stupid as look to Severus for confirmation, but he resolves to ask the other man about it later. Their relationship has been—strained, of late. Every time Percy thinks of his reaction to Severus' calm foretelling of his death, he wants to flush with shame.

"Pius, of course, will be our Minister, though he does not yet know it," Voldemort announces to a general round of chuckles. "And Percival will be his captor."

Percy becomes uncomfortably aware of everyone's attention on him. He swallows and crawls forward, his knees aching. "My Lord?"

"Percival, dear Percival," the Dark Lord says tenderly. "It has been months, and you have waited so patiently to show your worth after such a promising start. Perhaps you thought I have not noticed that you do not...participate in the fun and games that your fellow Death Eaters so enjoy."

"I apologise, my Lord," Percy says nervously. So the Dark Lord had noticed his departure at Samhain. Perhaps this is his way of punishing Percy, though Percy notes the covetous way that Yaxley looks at him, and thinks that some of the Death Eaters may think it some sort of reward.

"Perhaps you thought they were beneath you?"

"No, my Lord—"

"*Crucio,"* says the Dark Lord and for several agonising seconds Percy feels his bones crunch into dust and then reknit themselves forcefully, again and again, until he feels his very self to be a burning pile of ash on the floor.

The curse stops abruptly and Percy becomes aware that he is sobbing quietly. He does not have enough experience with the Cruciatus to try and moderate his response, like some of the more seasoned Death Eaters; each time the pain is a new type of torture, each time it takes him multiple throbbing heartbeats to come back to himself when the curse is over.

"Now, Percival, I know you do not like bloodshed, but you should not be shy to volunteer your talents elsewhere. You will watch Pius, and you will maintain the Imperius on him, and you will take your orders directly from Lucius—unless Lucius continues to disappoint me, and then you will take your orders from Yaxley."

In the corner of his mind that has begun to recover from the curse, Percy notes the way Yaxley inadvertently flicks a hungry gaze toward Lucius. Lucius will have to guard his back carefully, now that Yaxley has been publicly told exactly who is preventing him from ascending the ranks. For that matter, so will Percy.

Percy has a theory that the Dark Lord torments—yet trusts—Lucius so often because of his fondness for Abraxas and disappointment in Lucius. Tom enjoys hearing tales of Lucius' failures; they seem to bring him a sense of triumph paired with sorrow.

Thinking of Tom in his living room, unable to hide his eagerness for Percy's stories, helps Percy to crawl back to his knees, some of the fear receding, though the pain lingers. He has to be funny; Tom likes wit, and from the mocking and dryly sardonic speech pattern that the Dark Lord uses in these types of events, Percy gets the feeling that even Voldemort is experiencing a dearth of humour.

"This is a great honour, my Lord," he says, touching his forehead to the ground. "Although I do believe the Ministry will allow itself to be taken without a single Imperius. A single interdepartmental memo announcing the regime change should suffice."

Percy feels the men closest to him shift uncomfortably, but Voldemort's smile splits his lipless mouth, and his high laugh echoes around the room. "Nevertheless, you will take the necessary precautions. Our power must be absolute, our supremacy unchallenged."

The Dark Lord sounds more *reasonable*, lately, Percy realises with a large lurch of his stomach. He's clearly begun to plan. Even his demeanour has become more familiar, more like Tom. Perhaps he made another Horcrux? No, that would hardly make him *more* stable. Whatever rituals he's completing in the secrecy of the master suite at Malfoy Manor—Percy would love to hear what Lucius has to say about that—seem to be compensating for the corrupted blood and bone ritual.

Voldemort becoming saner and more reasonable is decidedly *not* a good sign.

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When Percy belatedly learns that Draco Malfoy nearly killed Ron, he barely manages to avoid storming into the castle and strangling the little snake himself. He already has one wizard to kill, and a formidable one at that; why is he bothering to continue petty schoolboy rivalries when his mother’s life hangs by a thread?

"A poisoned bottle of mead," Percy complains to Tom, pacing back and forth in front of the painting. "Mead, given to the Potions professor anonymously. A professor, I might add, known for his greed and penchant for hosting private little parties. What an idiot Draco is.”

“Perhaps the bottle was meant for Dumbledore,” muses Tom. “*He* will not be amused to hear of this latest attempt. The necklace was ludicrous enough.”

Percy scoffs. “Draco’s just grasping at straws. Slughorn would never have given that bottle to Dumbledore."

"But he did give it to your underage brother," Tom observes wryly. "Slughorn is still at Hogwarts? I thought Snape was the Potions professor."

"Snape is teaching Defence this year." Percy suddenly remembers what Harry had told him about Dumbledore recruiting Slughorn for some unspecified reason and tries to divert Tom's suspicion. "Slughorn begged for the position, apparently. He's dead frightened the Death Eaters are coming for his blood. Did he offend you?"

"Not at all," says Tom thoughtfully. "On the contrary, Slughorn was my favourite professor. The Slytherin Head of House, too. So openly self-serving, of course, it was rather couth; but to his credit he tried to help the Slug Club achieve their goals without prejudice, hoping to ride on their coattails to success."

Percy notes the Muggle expression in the midst of wondering whether Slughorn would have recruited *him* to his little club. Likely when Tom says *without prejudice* he means that Slughorn condoned Dark Magic, rather than meaning that he included Muggleborns, although Tom was a half-blood at a time when it was even less acceptable to be a half-blood as it is now, so perhaps he does mean the latter.

Percy tries for a joke. "And what goals of yours did he help with? World domination?"

Tom chuckles. "Nearly. He told me about Horcruxes, you know. Of course I knew what that were already, but I wanted confirmation that they were more than merely myths."

"Slughorn? He must be more interesting than I thought," Percy comments, trying to hide his surprise that a Hogwarts professor—even the Head of Slytherin House—would tell a student about *Horcruxes*, but perhaps times were different then, during Grindelwald’s reign. Percy has the uncomfortable thought that perhaps Slughorn was to Tom as McGonagall was to him, which makes him feel funny for a reason he cannot quite articulate. "Perhaps he was intentionally trying to poison Harry Potter, then, and accidentally got my fool brother."

"Slughorn would be a good recruit. He knows nearly everyone, after all. It makes more sense than him suddenly fearing for his life from the Death Eaters; he ought to know I wouldn't kill him, not unless he stops being helpful."

Dumbledore must be trying to get that information from Slughorn—but why? Does he truly not *know* that Tom made Horcruxes? Is he more behind in the process than they had thought? Perhaps he had not lied to Severus about not being certain about what, precisely, Tom did to stay alive, which would mean that perhaps they had been premature in assuming collaborating with Dumbledore would be counterproductive. Percy does not like to think that he made a mistake. He swallows heavily.

"Snape's the Defence professor?" Tom continues, not noticing Percy's inner turmoil. Perhaps Dumbledore wanted more from Slughorn. Maybe Slughorn *did* help Tom with creating the Horcruxes, or knows the secret of what they are, and that is what Dumbledore wants from the man. How can Percy get access to Slughorn? Would he respond to an owl?

"Sorry?" Percy asks when he realises Tom is waiting for something.

"Snape is the new Defence professor," Tom says impatiently. "You should warn him; there's a curse on the position. I cursed the contract when Dumbledore refused to let me teach, the prejudiced fool. I would have been an *excellent* professor."

"Will Snape die?"

Tom shrugs. "I was not very specific. But he shall only be able to teach for a single year."

"Well, if Draco or Snape kills Dumbledore according to plan, then I doubt he intends to teach again." Percy pauses and then adds, "Tom, how can I get to know Slughorn?"

"Jealous, are we?" Tom says mockingly, a strange little smile playing on his pale, painted lips. "You want to be in the precious *Slug Club*?"

"Slughorn is almost certainly working with the Death Eaters," Percy snaps back. "And I have no connections of my own, or have you forgotten my family is an embarrassment to wizardkind? I need allies, and I'm not ashamed to say it."

Tom chuckles. "Well, you have the new Dark Lord as an ally, to start, not to mention that Snape seems rather fond of you, but if you feel you must cultivate Slughorn, I won't disagree. He's quite useful. Bring him crystallised pineapple; he loves it."

A few days later, Percy tastes some of the crystallised pineapple that he purchases via owl order and blanches, spitting it out. Hermes snaps it up eagerly and cocks his head, waiting for more.

"Don't eat that, Hermes," Percy scolds him, summoning a nutritious owl treat from his cupboard instead. "It's nearly entirely sugar. Neither of us should eat it."

Tom snickers from the other room. "The sweeter the better for old Sluggy."

Percy meets Slughorn in the *Three Broomsticks*. It is a tad more public than he'd prefer, but he thinks he can justify meeting Slughorn to the Dark Lord, particularly when the man accidentally poisoned Percy's younger brother.

"Percival Weasley-Prewett," Slughorn says jovially when Percy locates him in the back of the pub. Unfortunately, all three members of the Trio are also there, but Ron is so fixated on the sight of Ginny snogging some boy—Percy averts his gaze politely, unlike Ron, who stares intently—that he hopes to pass by unseen.

Slughorn is already tipsy. Percy pushes across the candied pineapple and tries to smile winsomely. "Very honoured to make your acquaintance, Professor."

"Yours as well! I've heard nothing but good things, m'boy, nothing but good things. Although I must say, young Harry Potter may be usurping you for best Potions student! Even Severus has to admit the boy's got genius." Slughorn chuckles to himself, his greedy fingers reaching for the sweets and popping one into his mouth, leaving some crystallised sugar on his moustache.

Percy very narrowly resists the urge to turn and glare at Harry. Harry Potter, good at Potions? Percy knows Harry well enough to know that he makes only a token effort at his classes, Defence being the notable exception, and even in that case he primarily succeeds at the practicals rather than the theory.

“Well, Transfiguration was always where my passions lay,” Percy says politely. “I love Potions, but I fear I do not have the natural talent for it.”

“Yes, I heard Minerva offered you an apprenticeship! I must say, m’boy, and I say this out of genuine concern for your career, you really ought to reconsider turning down the opportunity. Particularly with these turbulent times, it might be safer to ride them out in Hogwarts, and an apprenticeship offer from Minerva McGonagall is rare indeed.”

“Well, I am Senior Assistant to the Minister,” Percy says, a tad coolly. “Soon to be Junior Undersecretary.”

Slughorn raises his thick, bushy eyebrows and takes a hearty swig from his tankard, draining the rest of the foam in one large gulp. “Stuck between a rock and a hard place, I see. Very good, very good! So, what can I do for you?”

Percy readies himself for the confrontation, checking that his wards are active and humming with energy. He reaches out with his magic as an extra precaution, but his magic only brushes against the students in the room, and a few token adult wizards sipping on their drinks in the corner. “Sir, I must ask you something as Head of Slytherin House, as well as someone that surely knows everyone, and therefore has a very good idea of what is coming.” Percy learns forward, his tone low and urgent, hoping to impress upon Slughorn the seriousness of his words (and to block the man’s reaction from the people sitting behind Percy, should they look up). Slughorn unconsciously leans in too; Percy wrinkles his nose at the smell of Butterbeer that wafts from his bulbous face, sweet and cloying. “I have come to the attention of Tom Riddle. You know of whom I speak, I presume?”

Slughorn’s face shuts down immediately, and he pulls back as if shocked. “My boy, I cannot say I want to hear any more.”

“*Please*, Professor. I’ve no one else to ask this kind of question.” Percy gives him a pleading look. “Riddle isn’t the type of man you say no to, not unless you have a good reason. You taught him, didn’t you?”

Slughorn nods slowly, his eyes darting around for an escape. “Yes. Many years ago...but it would be a mistake to say I knew him well.”

“I don’t know what to do,” Percy says, widening his eyes desperately. Time to pry. “Professor...if he’s going to succeed, if he’s not going to be stopped...I should join him, shouldn’t I? Better to join now willingly than by force later on?”

“Tom is very powerful,” Slughorn confirms, his voice sinking into a quiet murmur. “Very determined…”

“Professor, if he thinks fondly of you, he might recruit you too. Are you going to turn him down?”

“I am no killer, Mr. Weasley-Prewett,” Slughorn whispers harshly. “I cannot join him; I cannot condone what he does. He is not human; he does not share our morals.”

“But if Dumbledore is defeated, we’ll have no choice, will we?” Percy insists. “I’ve heard rumours that Tom cannot die. What hope do we have against someone who can’t die?”

Slughorn swallows roughly, his eyes darting around him in panic, only now thinking to raise a privacy charm. “But Potter, Dumbledore thinks Potter can defeat him.”

“Do you truly believe that, sir?”

Slughorn swallows again, his Adam’s apple bobbing furiously in his fleshy throat. “If the rumours are true...if Tom cannot die...then only one blessed by prophecy will be able to defeat him.”

Percy decides to take a risk, adding another layer to his privacy charms so that an eavesdropper would not even be able to read their lips. “Sir, has Dumbledore mentioned the word *Horcrux* to you?”

Slughorn’s face, already pale, whitens until he looks nearly like a ghost. “My boy, where did you hear that word?”

“Tom has them,” Percy reveals, looking as intently as he can at Slughorn. “Multiple, I think.”

“Seven…” Slughorn whispers to himself. He looks as though he is reliving a memory, and Percy allows him to finish it without interruption. When he turns his gaze back to Percy, there is fear growing in his eyes. “You know of this?”

“I believe one of Tom’s enemies tried to destroy them, but he left no trace of his success,” Percy says, finally getting to the real reason he’d set up a meeting with Slughorn. “Professor, do you know how I can track whether they have been destroyed? Is there a way to measure how much of one’s soul is remaining? I worry that Tom is making more, and we’ll never be certain that we got them all. We’ll live in fear, even if he seems to be destroyed, that he’ll return decades later, in a new form.”

“I must think.” Slughorn raises his tankard with a trembling hand, but sets it down with a clank when he realises it is already empty. “The situation is worse than I’d thought...I did not know he succeeded...”

“I think Dumbledore brought you to Hogwarts for this information. Professor, you should give it to him, if you’ve not already.”

“He will think so poorly of me...”

“Tell him that you know Tom made a Horcrux,” Percy says urgently. “Or tell Harry...he is just a boy, he will not judge you harshly.”

Slughorn swallows again. His eyes flick over Percy's shoulder, presumably to where Harry is sitting. "So young, for such a burden," he says, again to himself, before turning his attention to Percy. "I will think on your question."

"I've been trying to work with a Dementor," Percy says recklessly. "But I don't know if it's going to work."

"A *Dementor?"* Slughorn hisses, his face paling further. "My boy—you will come to ruin. You ought to forget you ever heard the name Tom Riddle."

Percy can't help it; he snorts, and more loudly than he means. "That's really not an option for me, Professor. Nor for any of us, if things continue the way they do."

"Tom will kill you," Slughorn whispers hoarsely. "Mr. Weasley, he will not show mercy."

(***Won't I?*** whispers Tom.)

"He will not show any of us mercy, given the chance," says Percy coolly, standing and looking down at Slughorn disdainfully. He can't imagine Tom thinking of Slughorn like how Percy thinks of McGonagall, but then again, it would be out of character for Tom to hold a professor in such high esteem. Perhaps the idea of Tom *looking up* to Slughorn had been what turned Percy's stomach so uncomfortably at the thought. "I'll come back in a few months. Look out for my owl."

Percy faintly recalls that Slughorn remains on at Hogwarts to teach during the final year of Voldemort's reign. He wasn't killed, and Harry destroyed the Horcruxes, so he presumably gave Harry the information he sought without burning any bridges with Voldemort. If he worked up the courage once in his miserable little self, he can do it again.

On the way out, Percy lingers in a dark corner, pretending to duck into the loo before casting a Disillusionment Charm. Hidden, he watches Ginny laughing with her boyfriend; Harry and Ron watching her intently, though presumably for different reasons; and Hermione flushing red when Ron gracelessly touches her mouth to indicate where she has Butterbeer foam.

They are all so young, so concerned with their relationships despite the looming threat. The rest of Britain has begun rationing their happiness like white sugar for their tea, looking over their shoulders for the chilled misty breath of a Dementor, holding their loved ones tightly in bed at night. They're burying silver coins in their gardens and tying bundles of herbs at their fence posts. They know what the Ministry tried to deny for too long: war is coming, and they will be the first to be sacrificed.

But here at Hogwarts, the students seem to not understand, though their last few years had been fraught with peril. Even Harry is able to do something as ordinary as fall for his friend's younger sister. Is it because he does not know the prophecy? Will Percy have to tell it to him, will that awful burden fall to him in this timeline, to ensure the Chosen One understands his task?

Is it only Percy that cannot rid his mind of the burden of prescience, of understanding precisely what is to come? He has knowledge of the future, of course, but even in the first

timeline he had seen some version of what was to come and prepared himself accordingly. Had Harry died, had he failed, Percy would have been perfectly positioned to take a respectable position in the Dark Lord's kingdom. He may have been able to use that influence to save the lives of his family, all of whom recklessly, and with no regard to the alternative, branded themselves defiantly as traitors.

He'd dated Penny for sixteen months. In that time they'd slept together a dozen times at most. He'd never contemplated marriage; he'd never introduced her to his family; he'd never included her to his private thoughts, as wild and tormented as they were. He had dated her because he'd admired her, because she'd liked him, and he'd said goodbye to her with a small sting in his heart that was utterly dwarfed by the terror he felt every day.

Even before the war he'd never been so careless, so free, so childish.

Percy sighs and begins to leave. Perhaps after the war, if he's still alive, he can try to recapture some of his long-lost youth.

Or he'll die, and it'll be a moot point entirely.

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Percy would have expected Tom to interrogate him about his meeting with Slughorn, and he'd prepared a series of lies accordingly. But Tom isn't there when he returns from Hogsmeade, and he spends the night away too, doing Merlin knows what with the Dark Lord. It makes Percy uneasy. Tom is unpredictable after his time with Voldemort, liable to be angry or arrogant, depending on whether he is pleased by what he sees in Malfoy Manor.

So when Tom reappears the next morning, as Percy is eating breakfast, Percy tenses instinctively over his bowl of cornflakes. His eyes flick to Tom, and he sets his spoon down cautiously. Tom's agitation is written all over the way his painted clothes crease over his frame, how Tom paces toward the boundaries of the canvas as if to step right off and into the room with Percy. Not a good night with the Dark Lord, then. Whether that means the Dark Lord has become more or less powerful remains to be seen.

"Why have you not progressed?" Tom snarls at him without an introduction.

Voldemort must be getting stronger, then, and not in a manner that Tom approves of, given the flaring of the portrait's nostrils. "Tom—" Percy begins, his tone conciliatory, hoping to cut off Tom's cloud of anger before it billows into a thunderstorm.

"What insipid excuse will you have for me now?" Tom does not reach openly for his wand, but his long, pale fingers flex by his side, as if he wants to strangle Percy.

Percy swallows. He does not know what Voldemort must have done to rattle Tom so deeply, but he can be sure it is nothing good. Maybe Voldemort has finally made another Horcrux, or

perhaps one of those elemental rituals he's been trying so desperately actually succeeded.

"Tom, you've been working with me this whole time," objects Percy defensively. "You've seen how hard I've been working."

He knows immediately it's the wrong thing to say. Tom laughs, and not kindly, the harsh sound so different from Tom's usual velvet tones. "You've been spending more time worrying about your pathetic excuse for a father than helping *me."* Here Tom's voice turns sly and unpleasant at Percy involuntarily looks at his father's portrait, leaning against the wall opposite to Tom. "Unless you've been lying to me this whole time. Unless you don't want me to come back. Is that what's holding you back, Percy?"

"Tom, you know that's not true." Percy hesitates and blurts out, "I've recruited Andromeda Black. She's reached out to Narcissa Malfoy…we're trying to get into the Black family vault."

Even this revelation, as ill-advised as it may have been for Percy to say, doesn't slow Tom. Tom paces back and forth like a caged beast, his robes swirling around him. Percy can feel Tom's magic building, a low level of static electricity in his flat that sparks discordantly against his own magic and sends prickles down Percy's spine. Tom *has* been growing stronger, Percy realises, though he can only hope the canvas continues to contain him.

"I've seen you perform far more capable feats of magic than convincing one silly woman to let you into her vault," hisses Tom. "I taught you the Imperius myself, or didn't you tell me that? Oh, no, Percy. I know what you're capable of when you're motivated."

Percy *had* considered just enchanting Narcissa, but he'd kept it aside as a last resort, given that he isn't sure if he could hide such a thing from the Dark Lord, or from Narcissa's sister. "Tom—"

"So perhaps what I need to do is motivate you."

"Tom—" Percy begins, half-rising from behind his desk.

"I do not want any more excuses!" Tom roars in anger, thrusting out his hand as if to cast a wandless spell, three fingers on his left hand curled over his right shoulder. Percy feels like he may have recogised the sign, but he can't dwell on it. Two things happen in short succession: Tom's eyes flare red, and Percy's diagnostic charm on the portrait of his father twangs urgently.

"Tom," Percy says, very slowly, still crouched over his chair, one hand supporting him on the wooden desk. It feels like if he were to move, Tom may leap out of the portrait and strike him down. "Tom, don't do anything reckless."

"I've been nothing but patient," Tom hisses disgustedly. "I have watched your ineptitude and hoped you would not let me down, but at last I must take matters into my own hands."

The charm twangs again. Percy straightens up, points his wand at Tom's portrait, and says, as calmly as he can, "What are you doing, Tom?"

"Your father's dying, isn't he?" Tom says tauntingly. "His magic is failing, and nobody knows why."

"*Tom*."

"I can go into his portrait, you know," and suddenly Percy stifles a cry as Tom appears like magic in the frame on the opposite wall. His father looks at Tom curiously, and Tom reaches out and strokes one long finger down Arthur's face. "I can feel his magic."

"Tom, stop it," Percy orders, the pieces of the puzzle slotting together with an abrasive clang. "I'm so close to the locket. Tom, please."

"*Tom, please*," Tom mimics nastily, his finger still on Arthur's face. "Your father's dying, Percy, and there's nothing you can do. Wouldn't you want his death to be for good? He'll bring me back, and then you won't have to worry about finding the locket."

"I'll stop you," he says desperately. "Tom, *please."*

"You couldn't stop me if you tried," Tom says tauntingly, and then thrusts his hand out again in the same motion, his fingers bent grotesquely like claws.

Percy's charms chime with a thousand bells, each more panicky than the next, the sound filling his ears until he drops to his knees next to his desk. The magic swells and gathers, blowing through the flat, and Percy screams as the icy feel of Tom's magic slices through his shields as if they were insubstantial. He crawls across the floor, his knees brushing painfully against the sharp bristles of his rug. Out of his blurry eyes he can see his father's painted face twisted into a scream of agony.

"*Let me in!"* Percy howls, gathering his magic and sending it through the clamour to the portrait. "I created you, both of you, and you will *let me in now!"* He forces his will into the layers of paint and canvas and wooden frame, calls upon his magic like he'd twice before, once to force the Marauder's Map to give up his secrets and once to force a simple map of London to show him the history of Tom Riddle. He'd conquered those, and he'll conquer these now. The portrait struggles against him, but in the end it recognises his magic and falls silent, dormant, allowing his dominance.

With a flash he's inside, he feels Tom, he feels his father, and the three vines of their magic flow and twist together. Percy's arm is burning, Tom's magic is flaring, but his father is fighting, and Percy suddenly sees him, clutching Molly's hand, his face pale and beaded with sweat, Molly's tears dripping onto his chest, and Percy feels his father reach inside himself and say *I will not leave her to do this alone.*

You fool, Tom thinks contemptuously, and Percy distantly feels his body scream as Tom tears at Arthur and Percy's magic.

Dad, please, Percy thinks, and Arthur inside the Burrow says weakly, "Percy?"

I will kill you, Tom whispers blackly. ***I see your soul and you are a liar, Percy, and a traitor. I will kill you and it will last for an eternity.***

No, thinks Arthur fiercely, and Percy sobs from the burning feeling of his father gathering his strength.

I will kill you and make him watch, or maybe I will make him kill you. Everyone breaks by the end, Percy, and you will break easier than most. I know your soul. I see it whenever you face me. That is the wisdom of the diadem, you know. It is not for book-knowledge or curses, it will not answer every question you have, but it will show me everyone's soul, and yours is unsalvageable. You will die even without my help, Percy Weasley, and you will beg for mercy before the end.

Tom reaches out and touches *something* inside Percy, that same *something* that has been eluding Percy, slipping into the edges of his consciousness while he doses himself with various combinations of ingredients. Percy inhales sharply, sucking in a breath as his chest grows cold. For a second he sees a flash of evergreen trees, of a cold grey glistening lake, of warm yellow lights in high draughty towers, and he is oddly relieved. Comforted, even.

Then Tom laughs, and the sound echoes in Percy's head, hammering into his skull. The image in front of him flickers, and then splinters, and he's returned to the awful tableau of Arthur-the-portrait layered over Arthur-the-man, the two images superimposed like layers of paint.

Leave my son alone, Arthur thinks, or maybe yells, and Percy winces as Molly clutches his hand tighter, and sends her magic into the whirling tangle inside her husband. His mother's magic tastes like mint, he realises dizzyingly, like rosemary, like the small tray of herbs she perpetually had growing in the kitchen windowsill. His mother's magic tastes like earth, and his father's like heavy rain, and the feel of it grounds Percy, whose body is as light and unfettered as ash spinning from a burning tree.

Stop it, orders Tom harshly.

No, his father says simply. There are no dramatic speeches, no youthful declarations of glory, but Arthur steadies himself against the solid feel of his marriage bed—Percy feels the weight on his back, feels a ghost-memory of his hands smoothing the wood, understands suddenly that Arthur built that bed the Muggle way for Molly, like the wizard Odysseus in the old myths—and his wife's hand and pushes back with all the defiance of a father who's had his family challenged one too many times.

Tom howls in pain and agony, and Percy howls with him as he is pulled sickeningly into another memory. Suddenly it is not his father in front of them but Tom's, looking as much like Tom as Arthur does Percy, on his face the same cold disdain that Tom employs to great effect. Percy feels their hand tighten around Tom's wand, sees the handsome features of Tom Riddle in front of him shaped into a new face, and hears the sound of their fathers pleading for mercy.

You shall have exactly as much mercy as you showed me, Tom tells his father, and twists his wand in a complicated fashion. He calls upon the ancient gods, presents his mother's ancestral ring, and demands they aid him in this task for glory.

Percy and Tom scream as the gods, or whatever energy gathers in those strange, crackling clouds ahead, accept Tom Riddle's life, as the magic snags on the moment that his soul splits,

as the gush of pure, elemental magic present even in a Muggle's dying wish is ripped forcibly from Riddle. They scream as the black oily magic reaches out its tendrils, reaches out to the only soul in the room, and burrows itself insidiously in Tom's flesh.

No! Tom yelps in fear. ***I cannot bear it again—*** and this time Percy screams alone as Tom wrenches himself away from the memory of his father, and Percy falls heavily back into his body.

His father's portrait bleeds. The blood drips from the bottom of the canvas as if the entire painting is drenched. Percy blinks hazily at it and then up at Tom's portrait, where Tom lays sprawled on the floor, unconscious.

He may not be dead, Percy thinks, but he cannot bring himself to move. Drip, drip, drip. Something's wet on Percy's face and it feels like blood. *Dad. Dad may not be dead either.*

This thought fills him with more urgency. He clutches his wand tightly and prays for a Patronus. His first attempt produces only most, but Percy reaches desperately for the image of the trees and the lake and the castle that had come to him for one silver shining moment. He is not happy, not optimistic, not anything other than determined as he gasps "*Expecto Patronum"*, but perhaps that singular moment of clarity was sufficient. A bird unfolds out of his wand, more a silver shimmer than an actual shape, like a mirage glimpsed in a puddle on the road. "Bill Weasley," he gasps. "Dad—the Burrow—go quickly."

And then he slides sideways off the couch and collapses into the blessed peace of oblivion.

DECEPTION (4/4)

Chapter Notes

I think I paced these a bit strangely...the last chapter was a tad short, and this a tad long. Looking for feedback as always as to breaking up these chapters, since as I've discussed before I write each year in one long word document and then break it up only when posting. I am heavily revamping the next set of chapters based on some feedback I've gotten, so it may be a bit of a delay, but I promise to have it up soon!!

Thank you to all of those who left comments! I definitely take your feedback into account, so please keep it coming.

CHAPTER TEN: DECEPTION (4/4)

1996—1997 (Percy is 20 & 33, Severus is 35, Harry is 16, and Dumbledore has one year left to live)

When Percy awakens, he feels at once that he has been asleep for far too long, but also that it has hardly been seconds since he last opened his blurry eyes. His head is pounding, a low, rhythmic sort of torture that makes him wince when he lifts his head and tries to look around. Slowly, the sights of his flat, thrown into relief by the sharp kitchen light against the dark shadows outside, swim into focus. Percy half-expects to see someone hovering over him nervously—maybe Bill, or his mother, or even Snape—but his apartment is cold and silent, and he is alone.

He hears an owl hoot plaintively. Hermes? Percy blinks and looks around slowly, the throbbing in his head intensifying into something just short of a migraine. With careful, deliberate movements, he raises his hands and massages his temples, right above the rim of his glasses. Penny had shown him the Muggle way of relieving headaches once, and loath as he would be to admit it in this timeline in case anyone was listening, it often works.

Today, however, Penny's trick has no effect. Percy has to breathe through his headache as he takes stock of the situation. He's on the floor. He must have fallen. His magic is tired; he reaches for it hesitantly, but it takes a long second for it to come to his bidding. He has a sudden image of Severus Snape hovering over his tiny form in the hospital wing. *You're a bit of an idiot, Weasley.*

If only Severus knew.

Percy searches for panic, but he's not panicking, not even a little. He feels more hysterical than afraid, more numb than hurt. His mouth tastes of dirt and his legs are sticky and he's a

bit hungry and his entire flat smells unpleasantly of blood. It occurs to Percy suddenly that he has not panicked very much at all, at least not recently. Perhaps he has become accustomed to the tenor of his life. He wonders absently whether he ought to be relieved or worried.

The owl hoots again. Percy exhales again and then sits up, holding onto his desk as his head swims in confusion. His father's portrait is lying next to him, though it looks like most of the paint has dripped off with the blood, and only the charcoal outline improbably remains. Percy steels himself and looks up at Tom, but Tom is where Percy remembers him: sprawled on the floor, much like Percy is now.

He has to destroy the portrait, tonight.

But first he must get to his feet. He nearly stumbles with the effort, but he manages to pull himself up, noting in a distant, pragmatic sort of way that he will have to dispose of the desk and re-carpet the entire place. Maybe he will just move, leave the whole wretched place behind.

His bag is leaning against his desk, and he slings it across his chest. It's heavy, but not unbearable. Thank Merlin he'd enchanted it with lightening charms when he'd had the chance. He withdraws three restorative potions and drinks them all, one after another, until his headache begins to clear and warmth rushes painfully through body. When Percy puts his hand back in for a strength potion, he touches the moleskine pouch he used to keep the Philosopher's Stone, and realises with a lurch that if his father *is* dead, he would have died despite Percy and Severus holding the literal key to immortality.

(Or would using the Stone to keep his father—and therefore Tom?—alive count as doing harm with it? Percy thinks of the inscrutable twinkle behind Dumbledore's glasses and cannot guess what the other wizard would view as *harm*.)

Regardless, he cannot do anything about it now. Percy moves the pouch aside and reaches for the strength potion. His limbs finally stop trembling. The concoction he'd just downed will last only a few hours; if Percy is not in bed by then, he's liable to collapse on the spot, and this time be out for longer than before.

But it matters not. Now the only thing that matters is determining if what he'd experienced had actually happened, or if it had been a feverish dream.

The owl hoots again, even more sorrowfully than the last. Percy moves to the kitchen and opens the window. To his surprise, Erroll flies in, looking ruffled and angry and achingly familiar. Erroll settles on Hermes' perch—Hermes is sleeping in his cage in Percy's bedroom, presumably—and sticks out his left foot.

Percy fills Hermes' dish with water and then reaches for the scroll. For a second he hesitates over it. For one remaining second, his parents are alive, and he knows that if he opens the scroll, that reality will be forever destroyed.

Then he shakes his head, thinking of Tom's unconscious portrait, of the task that still lies ahead. He cannot give into fear. Not now.

Percy,

At St. Mungo's. Unconscious but magic seems to be recovering. What did you do? Why would you attack Father like that? I thought better of you, Percy. You're not welcome at the cottage, not unless you're willing to repent.

William

Percy sags with relief, able to overlook Bill's scolding with ease. Thank Merlin. Thank *Merlin*. Bloody stupid for Bill to put as such in a *letter*, but given the circumstances—and Bill's rudimentary attempts at subterfuge—Percy will have to forgive him. Had Percy really managed a Patronus? He looks down at his wand dubiously. He does not think he can manage a *Lumos*, let alone a Patronus, but clearly he'd contacted Bill.

Tom had been leeching off his father's magic all this while, and *Percy hadn't noticed.*

Percy swallows roughly and then turns to look over the kitchen counter to Tom. He'll destroy him. Tonight. Now. Fiendfyre.

He needs somewhere to cast it, somewhere where the curse can rage itself out. But he can't curse it, of course. His magic twinges, reminding him of the vow he'd taken. He needs someone else to cast the curse. Severus, of course, is the only one he can rely on to know the spell.

The notebook. Percy reaches for the notebook, which he keeps inside his robes or bag at all times. Praying that Snape has it on him, he digs in his bag for a self-inking quill and then flips it open, shaking the quill impatiently to activate the spell.

We need to destroy the portrait. Today. He attacked my father directly.

No response.

Percy breathes out forcefully through his nose. Well, he can take the portrait to Gringotts, but he's worried he does not have the strength for it, depending on how crowded the bank may be. Not to mention, he's not sure if he can handle an Apparation, let alone the jolting ride through the caverns of goblin space below.

He does have the strength to cover Tom's portrait with the blanket from his bed, wrapping the frame as many times in the cloth as he can before tying one of his belts over it. He can't quite manage a shielding charm, but he hides the whole blasted thing under his wooden kitchen table, boxing it in with the chairs on either side. Maybe it's not secure, but it makes him feel better to have the whole thing bundled up and out of sight. He can tell Tom is still alive; his Mark sparked, just a little, when Percy touched the frame to move it. He still has his magic, as tired as it may be, so he didn't manage to destroy the diadem. In short, nothing has changed, except Percy is aware of how stunningly blind he'd been to the plot Tom was hatching.

Standing in the shower—the Scourgify charm he'd cast refused to comply—Percy stares blankly ahead as the warm water beats down relentlessly on his head.

Severus had warned him, but he hadn't listened. Tom had warned him that he could enter his father's portrait, and he hadn't considered that Tom could exert influence on the life ward. Tom is the diadem, and he hadn't thought about what powers that might have given him. Percy had thought he was being so clever, manipulating Tom, never lying outright, and all this while Tom had known his secret and was manipulating him back.

And his father might be dead. Oh, Bill said he was fine now, but Percy is not one prone to optimism. Until Tom is destroyed—both of them, all of them—then his family won't be safe.

Percy shivers as he recalls that prolonged, endless moment of connection with Tom, his father's magic swirling around them, Tom's anger sharp and painful. Arthur had forced out Tom, somehow. Percy tries to think about it, tries to force himself to analyse the problem analytically, but all he can fixate on is the sharp chill of fear in his chest as the black misty magic dove into Tom's soul.

He hadn't felt Tom's soul *rip*—but that fear, that grasp on his soul, the flood of power spreading its fingers insidiously over that which is warm and protected inside his body...that he feels, over and over again, shivering with the force of it. How had Tom done this multiple times? How had he done this at sixteen? Even immortality could not be worth losing that which makes him *him,* could it?

Percy is no theologian, though he is vaguely aware of Muggle religion. When he thinks of souls he thinks of it as something as fundamental as his brain, his eyesight, his magic. Handing it over to the ancient gods, magic for which he has no name nor understanding, to be *destroyed* is utterly unfathomable.

Percy cannot even focus on the knowledge that he's pretty sure Tom made the Resurrection Stone into a Horcrux, which means the Cloak and Wand are now likely suspects as well. His mind slides over the knowledge like water.

When he gets out of the shower, he feels a wave of exhaustion crash into him, and it’s all he can do to lay down on his cool, empty bed, stripped of its warm blankets, and hope for sleep.

Despite the frisson of urgency he'd felt upon returning from unconsciousness, now he feels acutely as though he has been petrified and cannot move. He does not know how long he lies there, breathing in the faint smell of blood and the soft, earthy scent of his shampoo. It could have been hours. Perhaps he sleeps, or perhaps he doesn’t; he does not even take his glasses off, and they press uncomfortably on his face.

Percy is broken from his silence by Severus, striding in the door with his wand blazing, his face drawn and angry. He stops abruptly when he sees Percy, and something like relief flits across his face. Something like relief fills Percy in return.

"You are not dead," Severus says into the silence.

Percy blinks and struggles to sit up, though he has to lean against the headboard. "Is my father dead?" His throat is scratchy and the words stick on their way into the world.

"He is in hospital." Severus pauses; Percy feels the weight of his gaze. "What happened?"

"Tom was leeching off my father," Percy says dully. There is a heartbeat that echoes between them and then Percy speaks quickly to pre-empt the inevitable lecture, "I know. I should have realised."

But all Severus says is, “How?”

“I made a life ward,” Percy reveals, drawing his knees into him on the bed. “With his portrait. Tom—possessed it, somehow.”

"A life ward." Severus sighs, the sound like a gust of wind in the stillness of the room. "I see."

"I should have realised."

"I did not consider it either."

Percy looks up at Severus. The other man doesn't do anything to indicate the enormity of *him* admitting a wrong, but the moment is fraught nevertheless. Somehow, it makes Percy feel marginally better. “Because I did not tell you.”

“You shan’t make that mistake again,” Severus says, with something in the proximity of humour. He exhales heavily through his nose and says, “Your father may have died in the Ministry without your efforts, as ill-guided as they may have been. I was delayed to answer Dumbledore’s call; your father was nearly gone by the time I arrived.”

Percy is not sure whether this is strictly *true*, but he grabs onto it as if it were a Levitation Charm lifting him out of a sickening drop. "We need to destroy the portrait."

"We will need to be careful it does not destroy your father, too. A Horcrux mixed with a life ward—this is uncharted territory." Severus does not say the obvious: if Arthur will have to die to kill Tom, then there will be nothing either of them can do, nor any chance of saving him.

Percy feels his eyes well up with tears and looks back down at his bed, smoothing his hand over the crumpled sheets. "I have not yet examined the life ward. Or Tom."

"I examined both, outside this room.” Percy waits for Severus to say something mocking about the Muggle shield Percy had built around the portrait with his furniture and sheets, but Severus says only, “He is...seemingly dormant, but I can sense the Horcrux within. What *happened?"*

Percy shrugs helplessly. At Severus' glare, he elaborates: "I truly cannot say."

"Weasley—"

"Look, if you must, but I cannot say." Percy tips up his head. Severus does not move. "*Please.*"

"Legilimens."

If Percy thought it would be easier to relive the memory with Severus' mind pressing on his, he is swiftly proven wrong. The incomprehensible medley of magic, the cold shiver of pain and fear, the jarring sensation of Tom wrenching himself away from the memory—when Severus withdraws from the memory, they are both pale and breathing heavily. To Percy's surprise, Severus even takes a seat on the furthest corner of the bed, as if unable to maintain the energy to stand.

Severus speaks first, his sallow face twisted. "To have that much power, and to use it on something so unnatural…"

Percy nods silently, thinking of the portrait hanging on the opposite side of his bedroom wall for nearly the entire year. That unnatural magic had touched his father's soul, or something like it. "We need to destroy it."

"The ring makes five, and one more destroyed," Severus says. "I believe the time to speak with Albus has come. I do not think he will live to see the end of the school year. Draco is growing close to a solution, I fear."

Percy widens his eyes and then hurriedly informs Severus of his suspicion that Dumbledore asked Slughorn to teach to hear what he told Tom. "What if he does not have confirmation of the Horcruxes yet? What if that is why he did not confide in you? Should we still say something?"

For a second, Severus looks conflicted. Then his face clears and his pursed lips return to its normal forbidding scowl. "All the more reason for him to confide in his Defence professor, wouldn't you say? No, I think Albus knows at least marginally of the Horcruxes. He's been teaching Potter *something,* but the boy's magic does not feel stronger, nor is he displaying increased aptitude in any of his classes. I believe they may be discussing the Horcruxes. It is the correct time for me to mention my suspicions to him."

"We could ask Harry, after Dumbledore dies," Percy suggests. The act of discussing the issue of Dumbledore—something they inevitably do whenever they are together—clears his mind some of his earlier terror. But with Severus sitting so close to him, on the edge of his bed, he does not risk unfolding his long legs, instead continuing to hug them closely to his chest.

"I will speak to Albus. I think it is feasible I would have begun to suspect magic such as the Horcruxes." Severus begins to turn his wand thoughtfully in his hand. "We must first take care of the diadem."

"We do not even know how to destroy it."

"Fiendfyre," Severus says dryly, cocking an eyebrow at Percy. Percy flushes; the shame of the diary still stings. "But I do not think we ought to be hasty. At the very least, we must first discover whether the ward is still bound to Tom."

It takes them the rest of the night to establish that they cannot be sure if the life ward is still linked to the diadem. Neither Severus nor Percy can determine any sign of disturbance in the ward. In fact, the entire thing is cold and dormant, seemingly nothing more than paint on a canvas soaked with blood. But they cannot be *sure*, and the uncertainty stays their hands.

Percy does not allow himself to wonder how long Severus will consent to allow Arthur to live. If his father is to die, it will be because Percy pointed the wand at him himself.

"We will have to examine your father," Severus says finally, lowering his wand. He rubs his eyes tiredly; it is well past midnight, and they have been working for hours. "And the Horcrux more thoroughly."

Percy nods, taking a fortifying sip from the cup of tea he'd managed to summon. His magic is still tired but returning to him slowly; his part in the investigation had been largely limited to leafing through books. "I think the ward is dormant."

"We must try and speak to Tom." Severus flicks a glance at the kitchen table, where Tom's painted body remains buried beneath the detritus. His next words are careful and measured, as if forestalling Percy's inevitable objection. "I have thought further, and I think we should not yet destroy him."

"Then he may kill my father tomorrow," says Percy, but more automatically than with any real fervour. There is no guarantee that his father will survive the destruction of the Horcrux —or its survival. Either way, Percy may have ensured his father will not live beyond this horrid, byzantine task.

"We must consider whether the portrait knows of the sixth, if it does exist. Then our task would be near complete."

Percy shivers, but he cannot dispute what Severus is implying. "I do not think he will trust me again."

"He may trust *me*, but he may not. I believe it may be worth the risk for me to speak with him again."

Percy does not dispute this. Part of him wants to speak to Tom again, at the very least to rage at him for his actions, as childish as the impulse may be. He firms his jaw and downs the rest of the tea. "Let's do it now."

"You need not stay."

Percy gives Severus a look, who manages to communicate back with the barest lift of his eyebrow that for Percy to stay would be absolute folly, and Severus will not be held responsible for any future harm that may befall him.

"We will go to Headquarters," says Severus resignedly. Percy tenses, expecting Severus to Apparate away without him, but instead Severus extends his arm without comment. A second later, Severus' Apparation whisks them both away.

The spell threatens to undo Percy; when they arrive, he sways in place, his stomach turning unpleasantly as it recovers from the compression. When Percy's vision clears, he finds that they are in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place, empty save for the elf. Percy has poked around once or twice, but with Dumbledore's face in mind, has abstained from snooping where other Order members may drop in unexpectedly.

“Kreacher. We need a room that is magically insulated,” Severus orders the elf without delay. “Now.”

Kreacher hesitates. “I am not sures I can shows you,” he says doubtfully, though without rancour. Perhaps Severus’ status as Head of Slytherin House merits him the dubious honour of Kreacher’s respect.

Severus flexes his hand around his wand, a clear threat. Kreacher follows the motion and gulps, his ears swinging as he nods furiously. “There is one room, where Master Pollux used to do his experiments.”

Percy shudders at the thought but obediently follows Kreacher up many flights of stairs. He hesitates as they pass Regulus’ room, but for some reason Percy does not feel strong enough to open the door, to see Regulus’ cheerful face frozen in time next to the rest of the Quidditch team, to bear witness to the fruitless collection of newspaper clippings tacked against the wall. By the end of the walk, he feels tired and woozy, the stimulant potions he’d downed doing nothing to steady him against physical exertion.

“You may still leave,” says Severus quietly.

Percy straightens up forcefully. “No.”

“We have likely an hour before you are incapable of action,” Severus says with resignation. He levitates the portrait to the perpendicular wall and motions Kreacher and Percy to stand in the adjacent corner, as out of sight as they will be able to manage. "Kreacher, get Weasley out of here as soon as it becomes necessary. You will remain silent. You will not speak to any person, animal, portrait, ghost, elf, or creature about what you see here tonight. I command you as a member of the Order.”

Kreacher nods and backs into the wall behind Percy, his thin body shivering. Percy raises an eyebrow at the specificity of the command and the elf’s quick compliance; clearly Severus has said something similar to Kreacher before.

Severus clears his throat, shakes out his robes, straightens his body, and then says precisely, "*Ennervate.*"

The portrait glows with the light blue of the spell. For a second, nothing happens; and then Tom blinks his eyes open. He looks pained and confused—imagine, a portrait, a Horcrux, feeling pain, feeling confusion—but the moment he catches sight of Severus, his face smooths into stillness and he pulls himself up onto his feet fluidly, as if daring Severus to comment that he had previously been on the floor. Percy presses his hand against the wall, both to ground him, and to remind himself he cannot move.

Tom’s nostrils flare predictably. "Where am I?"

"The Black family manor," Severus says crisply. "Percy Weasley is dead, or doubtlessly he will be soon. What happened?"

Tom's face twists into a mask of anger—and, dare Percy say, a flash of betrayal. "He was a traitor."

Severus smiles without humour. "Weasley cared for two of your Horcruxes as though they were of his own soul. I have trouble believing him to be a traitor."

"He lied to me," Tom says darkly. "He loved his father. He *lied*."

"He does love his father," Severus concedes. Percy flinches. It sounds like an admonition. "But he hates that he does, despite all the man has done to him. But regardless, though he was close to collapse when I saw him, he asked me to continue our task together, my Lord."

From Percy's vantage point, he cannot see Tom's expression in great detail, but he can hear the faintest doubt in his voice when he asks, "He did?"

Severus nods smoothly. Percy cannot help but admire, even despite the strange, twisting feeling in his stomach as he listens to Tom, how slyly Severus has told the truth and yet conveyed something entirely different. "I have brought you here in secret. The Black heir slumbers above. His cousin, your loyal follower, cursed him to eternal sleep. His brother stole your locket. Is it here? Can you sense it?"

Tom closes his eyes. Severus does not look at Percy but Percy feels his eagerness nevertheless. Even Kreacher, silent and motionless behind Percy, feels eager, though he must not understand what is occurring in front of him.

Tom's magic rolls out of the portrait, so similar to the Dark Lord's, but so utterly different. Its glacial properties set Percy's teeth on edge, and he shivers, drawing into himself as Tom's magic drips coolly through the house, the same way his father's blood saturated the canvas. Percy hears a roaring in his ears, faintly, and his chest begins to feel impossibly cold, the memory of that black misty magic curling itself around him.

The rush stops abruptly, and Tom shakes his head angrily. "It is not here."

Kreacher flinches from behind Percy, the movement noticeable despite Percy's attention being fixed on Tom. He turns and glares at Kreacher, putting a finger pointedly over his lips. The elf may be fighting some sort of compulsion to punish himself for not having the locket for Tom, but Percy would be damned before he allows a house elf to ruin a delicate operation. Kreacher quails at Percy's look and lowers his head obediently.

"Percy seems to believe that you do not know the details of your other Horcruxes," Severus says. Percy cannot help but admire the way his voice is cold and cutting, accusing but entirely respectful. "I believe you know precisely what all six are."

"Even if I did, why must I tell you?" Tom says, equally coldly.

"Dumbledore destroyed the ring."

Tom makes a screech of anger so inhumane that Percy flinches alongside Kreacher. Only Severus bears it stoically.

"He knows now of the Horcruxes. Two are destroyed: the diary and the ring. One may be destroyed: the locket. You are the fourth. We believe the cup is safe in the Black vault, but we cannot access it without alerting the Dark Lord. To put it bluntly, my Lord, if you wish to return to a body, I must know what the sixth may be. Can you sense its destruction?"

"No," Tom says, his voice quiet and angry. "I cannot sense their destruction, only their proximity. But I will not tell you about the sixth. I do not trust you, Severus Snape."

Severus watches him steadily. Percy admires the way that Severus has wormed confirmation that there is a sixth Horcrux out of Tom. He watches the way his old professor arranges his face, raises his eyebrows marginally, flares his nostrils just slightly, and presses his lips together firmly. He looks entirely like Tom is a misbehaving Slytherin student. He looks fearsome. "I would not trust me either," he says finally. "I have taken a vow to your service, and it would be a lie to say I do not regret it. I spoke true when we first met, many months ago. The wizard I met who called himself Voldemort was miraculous: as powerful as the gods of old, as cruel and merciless and cold as the old tales, as enchanting as a myth. To be in his presence was an honour. To receive his confidence elevated you to a better version of yourself. I would have followed that wizard to the world beyond this."

Percy is struck with a sudden, intense longing to see Tom as he was in his glory, someone so astounding that even sour Severus Snape can talk about him two decades later with something like reverence.

"I am that wizard," Tom insists.

Severus laughs, and Percy flinches from the cruelty in it. "You are a portrait of a shade of him," Severus whispers. "But I believe you are him, and you will become him again. So distrust me, Tom Riddle, but if you do not wish for my help, I will leave you here to sleep eternally with the Black heir. I would rather never see you than be reminded of what you could have been."

Percy, irrationally, longs to prove himself to Severus, to be the man that he remembers—and, to his surprise, Tom leans forward, as if touching his nose to the thin line of the canvas, and says, almost desperately, "I *will* return."

"What is the sixth Horcrux?"

"I planned to use the Sword of Gryffindor," Tom reveals. Percy swallows roughly. "I was going to kill Dumbledore and use his death for the ritual, but I had not yet accomplished it before the diadem."

“And you do not know if *He* has accomplished it yet?” Severus continues in the same, low tone, as if Tom’s confession was not a surprise.

Tom’s eyes narrow in anger. “He does not trust me,” he hisses, as if to himself. "But I suspect he has. His magic feels...stretched."

“Surely you can fool him,” says Severus, low and enticing. “Surely he cannot hold a candle to your subtlety.”

Percy can just barely make out the way Tom smiles to himself, quick and mysterious, before he says, “And Percy?”

Severus transforms into obsequious in just under a heartbeat. Percy watches it enviously. No wonder Severus has survived this long as a spy; he can change his demeanour with just the barest shifts of expression, go from threatening to complimentary to subordinate without any of the transitions seeming false or insincere. “My Lord, of course I will dispose of him if you wish, but I would caution you against ridding yourself of a passionate ally.”

Tom nods once to himself. “Return me to him,” he orders. “Save his life, if he is dying. I will provide him the opportunity to explain himself to me before I take action.”

Severus inclines his head. “Certainly, my Lord,” he says. He glances over at the corner where Kreacher and Percy are still huddled together, but before Percy can take a step toward the portrait, Kreacher grabs him and Apparates him back to the kitchen.

Percy would complain, but the moment that Kreacher has him in a chair, he feels every muscle in his body begin to droop as the adrenaline wanes. No, he is in no state to talk to Tom, particularly if he must convince Tom of his *passionate loyalty.*

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Severus flatly refuses to allow Percy back into his apartment that night. He overrules all of Percy’s weak protests and takes him instead to his house, depositing Percy unceremoniously on the couch in the dimly lit main room.

“We will stay here tonight,” Severus says in a tone that very clearly will not allow for any interruptions. At this point, Percy is so tired that his vision has begun to blur, so he only nods weakly. Within minutes he’s asleep on the couch, his long body curled into a tight ball, red hair dishevelled and glasses askew on his face. He doesn’t notice Severus regarding him thoughtfully, nor does he feel the gentle jerk as the other man Levitates him up the stairs, taking care not to bang his body against the narrow stairwell. He doesn’t notice anything at all, since his body has shut down nearly to hibernation as his magic floods through his system, working to repair his frazzled nerves and unsteady condition. He does not even dream; his eyes are still beneath his eyelids, and his breath is regular and steady, betraying none of the horrors of the last few days.

When he wakes, he is confused.

His cheek is pressed against a pillow, and on the wall opposite his head there are curtains futilely blocking what appears to be an enormous sun streaming light into the room. The light is warm and amber, and for a few seconds all he can do is stare at the rays, befuddled, unable to process that it is clearly the late afternoon.

Automatically, he gropes for his glasses on the night table, and when he puts them on, the rest of the room swims into focus.

He is not downstairs, as he had vaguely expected to be, but rather in a small, immaculately neat room. The walls are bare, painted a light brown, and the only furniture aside from the bed and the night stand is a solid oak dresser. His face draws into a grimace as he tries to focus his still-tired mind on his surroundings.

Snape. Severus. He must be in Severus' room, in Severus' bed. The idea gives him a bit of a shiver.

Then the rest of his thoughts flood his brain, as if waiting for permission to overwhelm him, and Percy has to fight past an onslaught of terror as he remembers the series of events that brought him here, implausibly to Severus Snape's bedroom. Tom—his father—the portrait—the ring—the Sword of Gryffindor—Severus.

His father was in terrible danger. *Is* in terrible danger.

He forces his aching limbs out of bed, grabbing to the solid wood frame as his vision swims with the exertion of getting up so quickly. His magic is tired, very tired, even after what undoubtedly was over twelve hours of sleep.

Percy makes his way gingerly down the steep and narrow staircase, wavers between turning left and right at the foot of it, and then chooses left and steps decisively through a series of small, cramped doors into the kitchen. To his surprise, Severus is there, stirring a small saucepan of something on the stove, the absolutely heavenly smell of freshly brewed coffee wafting through the small room.

"Sit," says Severus without looking.

There is a small counter with two stools. Percy takes one and perches awkwardly on it. Severus is a little taller than him, and the stool is clearly sized for his height; Percy's feet barely brush the floor, and it makes him feel abruptly like a child. He wonders who the other stool is for, or whether Severus had no choice but to purchase them in a set.

Percy remains silent as he watches Severus navigate his way expertly through the small kitchen. Of course, if Percy had to guess, he'd assume Severus was a good cook; he is an excellent Potioneer, and logic would suggest the two are closely aligned. But it still surprises Percy to see the other man move nimbly around, preparing something into two bowls with precise, deliberate movements. A mug floats through the air and settles near Percy's elbow on the counter; a second later, a large bowl, speckled and blue, lands quietly to its left. A spoon swoops down a second later.

Peercy looks down. Inside the bowl is a heaping portion of oatmeal, covered with a deliberate sprinkle of brown sugar, slivered almonds, and fresh berries. For some reason it is this last detail, the thought that Severus went somewhere and obtained fresh berries just for Percy, that makes his throat close in emotion.

"Thank you," Percy says, looking up to meet Severus' eyes.

Severus pauses uncomfortably in the middle of directing the dishes to the sink, where a neat charm is already scrubbing out the coffee pot. “I noticed you often ate oatmeal for breakfast at Hogwarts,” the older man says as if to excuse the presumption of preparing breakfast in advance. “Though the time is closer to supper, I thought this may be more to your liking than a full meal.”

“*Thank you*,” repeats Percy with emphasis. Then he clarifies, because if he knows Severus Snape at all, he knows the man will avoid claiming credit for his good deeds unless they are explicitly stated. “Thank you for coming to check on me last night; thank you for handling Tom when I was unable to; thank you for giving me your bedroom; and thank you for breakfast.”

Severus flicks his gaze away and focuses his wand on setting another place for himself next to Percy. The counter is small enough that when Severus takes his seat, they are sitting rather close to each other, but not so small that Percy must struggle to continue looking directly at Severus.

Percy clears his throat and tries again. “I can never repay you, Severus.”

At this, Severus snorts quietly. “You can repay me by continuing to remain alive,” he says, his spoon clinking loudly against the edge of his bowl. “It…concerned me, to think you may have been injured along with your father.”

Percy swallows the large bite of oatmeal he had just taken, wincing as an unchewed blueberry slides angrily down his throat. “My father. Is he…”

“He is still alive, as far as I know,” confirms Severus. “I told Tom firmly that to kill your father would be to lose your allegiance. You will have to speak with him about Arthur.”

Percy notices Severus hesitate. “What?”

“It is just that he seemed…betrayed,” Severus says delicately, “at your feelings for your father. More than I would have thought from Tom. Many Death Eaters care for their families.”

Percy takes another bite of oatmeal but chews this one more thoroughly. “What are you saying?”

“Merely that I believe Tom views you more as a…well, perhaps not a friend, but something more than merely a follower. More like a contemporary.”

Percy glances sideways at Severus, who has allowed his hair to fall like a curtain between them. “I think that in a way he likes to hear that I am like him,” Percy ventures. “Of course, it’s Tom, so he doesn’t really want anyone to be *like him*. But at the same time, I have been consistent in pointing out parallels between our experiences.”

“I think his fondness for you is both positive and negative,” replies Severus. “Positive, as I believe it blinds him to your true purpose, and hopefully will allow him to be more forgiving of your transgressions.”

Percy waits impatiently, but Severus takes a sip of his coffee and does not finish his sentence. “And negatively?”

Severus shifts so that he is facing Percy more thoroughly. “It does not always bode well to come to Tom’s special attention.”

“He once paid you that attention, didn’t he?” Percy asks shrewdly. It is something he has long suspected, given the way that Severus talks about Tom.

Severus smiles thinly. “Yes. I, like he, hated my Muggle father and wished him dead. I, like he, had a mother too weak-willed to fight back against her abusive husband. I, like he, was brilliant yet overlooked, never trusted, always striving for more. The parallels were not difficult to spot.”

“Do you think his attention on you was more positive or negative?”

“In many ways, his attention shaped who I am today,” says Severus softly, returning his attention to his bowl. He spears a berry. Percy does not think he has ever actually seen Severus *eat* something, and so he watches the other man with interest, watching how Severus’ mouth closes over the berry, how his bites are surprisingly delicate and quick. “He has kept me close all of these years, forgiven my closeness to Dumbledore, and entrusted me with secrets he has told nobody else. But make no mistake: Tom is a collector of trophies, if you will. He watches me jealously and would never consent to lose me to another, whether friend nor foe nor lover. Once he has collected you, you can never leave.”

Percy is quiet as he turns this around in his head. He supposes that Tom—the original Tom—was to Severus as his Tom is to him.

“It must be hard for you to see him like this,” Percy finally says, thinking with a shudder of the Dark Lord’s scaly visage and the corrupted toxicity in his magic.

“Quite.”

Percy pushes a blueberry around in his bowl, collecting the last few oats on its side, but hesitant to spear it and end their breakfast. "I know we need to destroy Tom, but I have an idea, first, on what we can do to better diagnose the problem. I'd like to try it."

"Is it dangerous to you?"

Percy contemplates the Dementor, silent and menacing. "I don't think so."

"Then you may proceed, for now. You forget that Tom has cleverly informed the Dark Lord of his presence, so we cannot neutralise him as casually as you suppose."

Percy had forgotten about the Dark Lord entirely, which is why he supposes Severus has successfully operated as a spy through two wars, and Percy has barely made it through a timeline in which he had sufficient advance knowledge to plan his steps years prior.

Severus insists that until Percy is fully healed, he remain at his house. He mentions offhandedly that there had been some plan to have Pettigrew stay as his manservant, but

Severus had somehow managed to head it off, so if Percy wishes to repay him for the imposition, he can practise his magic on cleaning charms.

“The plan to have me Imperius the rat seems to continually pay dividends,” Severus says with a low chuckle. “He is terrified of me, and the Dark Lord was very pleased with my initiative. The thought of being in my house was too much for the rat to bear.”

Severus assures Percy that he has warded his house as tightly as he can, save the Fidelius, which he has avoided for reasons they do not explore. He keys Percy into the wards on the Floo and warns him not to access the house through any other means.

And then, stunningly, Severus *leaves him there.*

Severus Snape, one of the most private men that Percy has ever met, leaves him in his house, alone and unsupervised. Severus had once refused to let Percy Floo into his private office, and now, nearly two years later, keys him into the wards.

The moment Severus leaves, Percy has to resist the urge to look through all of Severus’ cabinets. He’s all too aware that Severus has bestowed upon him an incredible honour by leaving him in the house, and also that the other man is paranoid enough to hex all of his things.

So though Percy longs to look through the bookshelves, though he longs to open the dresser and look at Severus’ clothes, though he longs to search for some secrets into the inscrutable other man, he spends fourteen days living in Severus’ house and does not invade his privacy once.

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April 1997

When Percy finally works up the courage to return to his flat, he finds that Severus has tidied it, hung Tom back in his position on the wall, and left him a small row of Dreamless Sleep potions on his kitchen counter.

The sight of the potions lined up neatly, all with Severus’ characteristic spiky handwriting, strengthens him, and he takes a deep breath before striding to the portrait and ripping the sheet off the canvas.

"I am sorry," Tom says, entirely unexpectedly. Percy freezes, still grasping the sheet in one hand, and Tom takes the opportunity to continue. "I did not respect your feelings for your father."

Percy turns and breathes deeply through his nose as he folds the sheet and sets it on his small side table. Then he faces Tom again. Fourteen days alone in Severus’ house, Flooing directly into the Minister’s office and speaking primarily only to Scrimgeour, have fortified him.

"The diary was destroyed by Potter or Dumbledore," Percy says simply. "The locket was almost certainly destroyed by Regulus Black. We will not be able to access the cup if it is indeed locked inside the Black vault. The ring was destroyed by Dumbledore. You, of course, are born from the diadem. That makes four Horcruxes destroyed or damaged and one out of our reach, leaving only the sixth as a viable candidate for your resurrection."

Tom's face spasms in anger but he remains quiet, watching Percy with quiet intent.

"I do not want the Dark Lord, as he is today, to prevail," Percy says levelly, staring coolly at Tom. As always, he sticks with the truth, but truth wielded as a Killing Curse, silent and precise. "I know how to destroy you, too. I have kept you alive for three reasons: one, I do not know if your destruction will harm my father; two, I wish for you to return instead of the Dark Lord, so that we may work together; and three, I admit I have a measure of fondness for you, from all the time together we shared. I know you do not care about the first, you are unlikely to follow through on the second, and I doubt you remember the third, so I'm asking you, Tom, if there is another reason that I missed."

"You are wrong," Tom says with a small grimace. "Well, not about the first. You are correct that I do not care about your father's life. But you are wrong about the second and third reasons. This experience has been...humbling. I realise now I cannot rule alone. I do wish for company, company of equals. If you've seen my memories you will see that I always hoped to find companions in those around me."

Lies, lies, lies. They must be lies.

"I am not lying," Tom says, accurately divining what is going through Percy's head. "I cared strongly for Abraxas. I know you have suspected that for a long time. I can tell from Severus' interactions with me that I likely cared for him too. I know that is not many, but I would guess you have an equally short list of people for whom you truly care deeply."

Percy swallows, and after a second, gives a tiny nod. He knows that Tom is just trying to manipulate him, but he can manipulate Tom right back.

Tom steps closer to the edge of the frame, as if he could step right out. "I have learned to care for you, Percy. You have housed me, learned from me, and taught me in return. I admit I did not originally think you had much to offer, but I can admit freely now that I was wrong."

"What is the sixth Horcrux?"

"I intended to use the Sword of Gryffindor," Tom says, like he said to Severus. “But I believe *He* used something else. I do not yet know, but I *will* find out. I promise you this."

Percy purses his lips. "We are partners," he says sternly. "I am monitoring my father closely. If I believe his health is failing, I will burn you to a crisp, do you understand?"

"Partners," repeats Tom, and he even gives Percy a smile. "I can live with that. But if you destroy my last Horcrux, Percy, your father will be dead before you can blink."

Percy nods grimly. "Agreed."

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Over the next week, Percy and Tom navigate the fragile, brittle boundaries of their new relationship. More than once, Percy looks up to see Tom watching him carefully, much like he had when Percy had first awakened the portrait. Tom spends some of his time with the Dark Lord, but much more of his time silently reading a book and observing as Percy goes about his day.

Luckily, Tom is out the following weekend. Percy takes advantage of the silence by taking a nasty tome on blood curses into bed with him, enjoying the way his brand-new silk sheets feel against his skin. He is still not convinced that Lily Potter merely invoked the *power of love* to guard her only son, but he does not know nearly enough about blood magic to guess the details of what protection she gave Harry. Researching something that is not a Horcrux nor soul magic—Percy really ought to practise before he next returns to the Dementor, but every time he contemplates even changing form, he thinks of that black mist with a shiver—is relaxing, as grisly as the subject matter may be.

It is lucky that Tom is not present because Severus seems to find it necessary to send him an actual Patronus when Percy is halfway through the third chapter. The doe appears in his bedroom at the foot of his bed and gives him a panicked toss of her delicate head.

"*Potter attacked Draco. Fetch Narcissa. He may not live through the night.* "

At first, Percy is stunned, gaping at the misty stream of the Patronus dissipating. Severus' voice against the delicate silver doe is incongruous; if Percy had not seen Severus cast the Patronus before, he would have thought it was a trick. Then his brain snaps into action. Parents are not summoned to Hogwarts unless the matter is truly dire. Percy's stomach gives a lurch at the thought, fearing for Draco, but his fear is tempered by excitement. They had been waiting for an excuse to speak to Narcissa without an audience, and even the Dark Lord wouldn't prevent her from visiting Hogwarts if her son lay dying in the Hospital Wing. Percy wonders for a second whether Severus cursed the boy himself.

He scrambles for his wand, praying for success, but his Patronus does not listen to him and produces only mist. Hissing in frustration, Percy whistles for Hermes. "Go to Andromeda Black," he says urgently. Hermes cocks his head quizzically, extending out a leg, but Percy flaps his hand at the bird. "Don't take a letter, but keep at her until I'm there."

He'll have to figure out some way to bring her to Hogwarts; but first he must get to Narcissa before it is too late.

Percy takes a minute to breathe and firm up his shields, another to summon a set of robes to tie over his casual shirt and trousers, and another to stow the book hastily underneath his bed before he closes his fingers over his Mark. It pulses hotly under his fingers. Repressing a shudder, he murmurs, "*Morsmordre*."

He appears outside the front gates of Malfoy Manor and fights the urge to cast a cleaning charm. He hates Apparation via the Mark; it makes him feel like he's been dunked in hot, slimy syrup and left out in the hot air to dry, but he has no other way to get to Malfoy Manor now that the Dark Lord has taken up residence there. He shows his Mark to the unsmiling house elf at the gates and then sprints the long walk up to the house, dodging the gruesome white peacocks roaming freely on the lawn.

"Lady Malfoy," he calls out as he runs, channelling his panic and anxiety into what will need to be quite a performance. "Where is Lady Malfoy?"

She is in the east parlour, of course. Skidding into the room, Percy almost expects to see Mr. Barrington on the opposite couch.

Instead, Narcissa is sitting silently on the couch, alone. In one glance he can see that she is skeletal and quiet, a mere shadow of the woman he once knew. She is holding a slim book in her left hand and is immaculately dressed, her long black hair coiffed and curled into an elaborate bun, but Percy feels suddenly sure that she has sat in that exact position all morning without even glancing at the book, as silent and still as a statue.

"Lady Malfoy," he cries out, holding onto the back of a chair as he struggles to regain his breath. "Lady Malfoy, it's Draco."

Pale, she rises, one hand to her throat—but her eyes flick behind Percy, who suddenly feels that nauseating claustrophobia of being too close to the dense sticky heat of the Dark Lord's magic.

He drops to one knee, willing his still-frenetic breathing to still.

"What is this," Voldemort comments in a high, thin voice. "Has Draco failed in his task?"

Percy keeps his eyes on the floor. He shudders as the Dark Lord steps over him; his pale white feet are bare, his toenails tinged with crusted blood. Whether the blood is his or someone else's is irrelevant; Percy's stomach turns at the sight.

"It's Potter, my Lord," Percy says respectfully. "He's cursed Draco. Severus contacted me as Draco's Head of House to fetch Lady Malfoy. Draco may not survive."

Narcissa inhales sharply, but the sound is masked partially by the Dark Lord's high chuckle.

"Potter is becoming more interesting," he says, almost gladly, and Percy is suddenly reminded of Tom looking at him with an evaluative glint in his eye. *You're more interesting than I first assumed.*

"My Lord," Narcissa says, her voice thin with panic, galvanised by the danger to her son. "My Lord, I beg you. Please let me go to him."

"To Hogwarts?" Voldemort questions lightly. "To Dumbledore?"

"Dumbledore is not there, my Lord," Percy interjects. He ducks his head lower as he feels the searing weight of Voldemort's gaze. He does not know where Dumbledore is, but Snape

would not have contacted him if the Headmaster had been there. "My Lord, Severus said it was dire."

"I suppose I may allow it," the Dark Lord concedes. Even he understands the lengths that pureblood mothers will go to for their firstborn heirs, and the Dark Lord wouldn't want Draco to die, not without another successor to the Black name and fortune. "Lucius will remain here, and he will die, Lady Malfoy, if you dare to even speak to Dumbledore. But first, my dear Percival...you ought to know better than to bring news to someone other than me. I cannot let this go unpunished."

No matter how many times Percy feels the Cruciatus Curse wash over him, he never can steel himself against the pain he knows is imminent. This bout is relatively light, however; within seconds Percy finds himself panting on the floor, with only the memory of knives ripping into his skin to keep him company.

"I wish to speak to you, Percival, about the Ministry," Voldemort says conversationally, as though he had not just cursed Percy. From his vantage point on the floor, Percy can see Narcissa's robes rustle as she tries to restrain herself from her impatience. Percy cowers, expecting Voldemort to curse her too, but he only continues, "I believe we should aim to install Pius by the summer. I will allow you to decide how best to dispose of Scrimgeour by June."

Percy presses his forehead to the floor and resolutely does not give into his panic. "Yes, my Lord."

"Return to me tomorrow," he orders. "And watch Lady Malfoy carefully. Do not let her stray from your sight."

Percy nods and pushes himself painfully to his feet. Narcissa clutches his arm at once; he can feel her impatience. But they have to call for a house elf to take them to the edge of the grounds, where the anti-Apparation wards lift. The second Narcissa crosses the ward, she disappears, and Percy has to quickly follow.

Luckily, he guessed correctly, and when he reappears at the gates of Hogwarts, he sees Narcissa only seconds ahead, striding to where McGonagall is waiting for them, her face sombre. "Lady Malfoy," she says at once, opening the gates with a tap of her wand. "Come quickly."

Narcissa makes for the Hospital Wing nearly at a run, or as much of a run that a Lady of an old and ancient house will allow herself. She does not need McGonagall to guide her; though it likely has been years if not decades since Narcissa was last at Hogwarts, her quick steps show the kind of familiarity with the castle that all Hogwarts graduates retain, somewhere in the back of their minds. Percy follows closely behind.

Draco is the only patient in the Hospital Wing. He lies in the bed furthest from the door, his body still as if it were carved from cool marble. Madam Pomfrey, Severus, and Myrtle all hover over his body in varying states of distress.

Narcissa pushes them all aside as if they were nothing, her desperate fingers seeking Draco's. He shudders at the touch and mumbles something quietly, though he does not wake.

"What happened to him?"

Severus and Madam Pomfrey exchange looks. "He and Potter were duelling," Severus says, his voice uncharacteristically soft.

"My son is a fine dueller," Narcissa insists, her grasp tightening on Draco's hand. "What did Potter do? Attack him from behind? Use a Dark spell?"

"*Potter* is not a Dark wizard," McGonagall interjects angrily, her voice filled with meaning. Narcissa gives her a dirty look, colour flushing back into her cheeks as she prepares for battle with the other witch.

"I do not believe Potter intended to do Draco harm such as this," Severus says placatingly. "This spell is beyond his limited means; luckily, for Draco, as Potter would have killed him if he had cast it correctly. He found it in a book."

"A book?" Narcissa repeats incredulously. She turns to McGonagall and straightens, looking far closer to the regal queen that Percy remembers. "What business does Potter have reading books such as this under your watch? Meanwhile my Draco is treated with the utmost suspicion, vilified by his peers and his possessions searched by Aurors, and your precious Golden Boy is practising Dark Magic during a schoolyard duel?"

McGonagall bristles, but Severus clears his throat. "Potter will be punished, and the matter investigated," he assures Narcissa. "He has detention for the rest of the term, with me."

Draco moans, and Narcissa drops the issue of Harry's punishment as if it were a question of last season's robes. "Leave me alone with my son," Narcissa orders, the regal snap back in her voice. "All of you. Now."

They retreat respectfully. Madam Pomfrey shakes her head and bustles off to her office. Myrtle disappears, though Percy would bet she is floating invisibly just out of sight.

"Terrible, truly terrible," McGonagall says softly, glancing at Narcissa's form bent over Draco's. "She is right. Potter had no business duelling with that spell."

"What spell was it?"

"*Sectumsempra*," Severus says, enunciating the word carefully. Percy frowns; something about his tone indicates Percy should recognize the spell, but he cannot place it.

After McGonagall leaves, Severus' face closes. "Get Andromeda," he orders in a low tone. "I'll meet you in the Three Broomsticks in thirty minutes. Get a room."

"The Dark Lord told me to stay with her at all times."

"We'll have to Obliviate her and forge a set of memories anyway," Seerus says dismissively. "Go."

Percy flicks a glance at where Myrtle disappeared, but he can't pause to chat with her. Not now, when they have such a small sliver of opportunity.

Andromeda is waiting for him on her doorstep—a woman after his own heart—and she does not waste any time by asking stupid questions. Nevertheless, they barely manage to Apparate to Hogsmeade and quietly secure a private room from Madam Rosmerta before Severus arrives, Narcissa in tow.

"Andy," Narcissa breathes, stopping abruptly in the doorway of the room. Her gaze flicks between Percy, Severus, and Andromeda, and then her face hardens and her wand appears in her hand. "Severus, what is the meaning of this?"

"We do not have time, Narcissa," Severus says, ushering her inside the room and closing the door firmly behind him. "I will make this quick. We are betraying the Dark Lord. Bellatrix was hiding a Horcrux in her Gringotts vault—a part of his soul. We need to find it and destroy it, today."

Narcissa, to her everlasting credit, only turns marginally paler upon this news. She stares at Severus, and then at Andromeda and Percy, and then, shaking her head, takes a seat in the only chair. Percy expects hysterics, or perhaps disbelief, but she only looks at them with a raised eyebrow and asks, "And why should I go along with this plan?"

Andromeda perches on the edge of the bed, opposite Narcissa. Percy is struck by how similar they look, facing off like this, though he would not have said they had a strong resemblance otherwise. It is subtle: something about the curve of their chins and their long, straight noses betray that they are sisters, their shared heritage written across their dark, regal eyebrows and delicately bowed lips. "You have to, Cissa. For Draco."

"I am supporting the Dark Lord for Draco," Narcissa snaps back. "You are all fooling yourselves if you think you can betray the Dark Lord and succeed. His power is *absolute*. Severus, you should know better than most. I want nothing to do with this. Obliviate me and let me return home."

"And you should know better than most that loyalty means nothing to the Dark Lord," Severus replies coolly. "Or do you think he truly intends for Draco to succeed in his task?"

"Draco *will* succeed."

"And if Draco does succeed, he will be singled out as the murderer of Albus Dumbledore," Severus parries. Narcissa winces, but whether from the sharp sting of Severus' voice or his harsh words, Percy could not say. "He will not live to see thirty with that stigma on his head, and the Dark Lord knows that perfectly well. If he wanted one of us to kill Albus, he could have asked us at any time. He wants it to be Draco because Draco is not a threat to him; there will be no rumours that the man who killed Albus intends to usurp the Dark Lord. It will be apparent to all that he was the true orchestrator behind the murder. Narcissa, he has already stripped Lucius of his power, and you of your home. Do not wait to let him take your son from you too."

“You are a traitor and you will be killed,” Narcissa says with a breathless laugh. “I will not go along with this.”

“Mother taught us both Occlumency,” Andromeda says, her voice low and intent. “Mother taught us to guard our thoughts before we knew to speak. You can fool him, Cissa.”

“You are the fool, Andy. You thought you could have it all, and now you have nothing.”

Andromeda leans forward, as if to shut out Percy and Severus. “I was wrong to leave you, Cissa. I left you and Sirius and Regulus behind. Even Bella. We all went through that horrid childhood together, and we should have stayed together, and I am so very sorry for that, sister.”

“Regulus, Bella, and I *did* stay together,” Narcissa argues, completely ignoring Percy and Severus. “You’re the one that left, Andy.”

“Regulus betrayed the Dark Lord,” Andromeda says simply. “He stole one of the Dark Lord’s Horcruxes.”

Narcissa cannot contain a gasp, her gloved hand flying to her mouth. As usual, she goes immediately to the heart of the problem. Percy can’t help but think admiringly that as horrid of a childhood as the Black heirs must have had, it did provide their adult selves with an admirable level of competence. “There are multiple?”

“Six, and two destroyed, and one in your vault right now,” Severus confirms quietly. “And all without either Albus or the Dark Lord knowing.”

Percy steps forward, meeting her gaze. “We *can* destroy him,” he says quietly. “It is as Regulus said: we may perish for it, but we face death in the hope that our sacrifice will mean something. We need nothing from you save your silence and access to your vault.”

“Have you been planning this since you first came to my house?” Narcissa says quietly, her tone accusing, and her eyes never leaving Percy’s. It reminds Percy of how Myrtle had accused him of the very same, and he’s quick to shake his head.

“I came to your house because I admired you,” he says truthfully, “and I was flattered that you noticed me. I care for Draco, Lady Malfoy, and I care for Nymphadora, and I do not want either of them to die for their beliefs. Dumbledore is not a perfect man, and the Death Eaters are not wrong to want change, but they are wrong to endanger all of us for their agenda.”

“You could die,” Narcissa says.

Percy smiles bitterly, his eyes never leaving Narcissa’s. What he says next is calculated to win her sympathy, but it’s also true. “Then I’ll die and my siblings will live. I’m happy to take that risk, Lady Malfoy.”

“That’s the trouble with siblings,” Andromeda interjects softly. “Sometimes they let you down, and sometimes they protect you, and you can never predict which it’ll be.”

Narcissa holds Andromeda's gaze for a very long time. Percy stays silent, sensing that the two women are communicating silently about matters he cannot hope to understand. The war does come down to siblings in the end, siblings and parents and friends.

Narcissa finally lets out a gust of air and stands. "I will take you into my vault," she says. "But then I ask that you Obliviate me."

"But you know Occlumency, Narcissa," Andromeda protests.

"I will protect my son," she says firmly. "I cannot protect him if I am worried about protecting my own mind." She hesitates and then adds, with a shade of her own humour, "If you all do succeed in this mission, and I am on trial, don't forget to mention this, will you?"

"I cannot suppose any of us will live that long, but if we do, I promise you that we will have you heralded as a hero," says Andromeda fiercely. "You will not spend a single night in Azkaban, Cissy."

Severus clears his throat and steps forward. "I will Obliviate you myself," he says. "I have prepared a set of false memories to explain your lengthy absence. I will tell you that Draco may not live through the night; you will decide that you do not wish to risk his status as heir going to his half-blood cousin, and so you will go to Gringotts and ask if you can change the lines of inheritance."

"They can't," Narcissa and Andromeda say in unison.

"I doubt the Dark Lord knows that," says Percy. He sees the sisters both begin to protest and raises his voice slightly to speak over them. "The Dark Lord has never had a vault. He will believe you, Lady Malfoy, if you say that you thought you would be able to convince the goblins."

"I am not the Head of the Black House," protests Narcissa. But then she sighs and says, "But it is as plausible as a reason for going to Gringotts as you are likely to have, I suppose. Fine. I will bring Andy to Gringotts and then you will Obliviate me."

"One of us must accompany you," Severus says at once.

"I will not bring a non-Black into the vault," Narcissa says firmly. "I swear on my magic I shall not harm her, and I shall meet you back here once our business is concluded."

Percy and Severus exchange a look, but in the end, they cannot argue. This is likely the only chance that they have to get into the vault with Narcissa's cooperation, and time is a valuable resource.

"Go," Severus says, and the two Black sisters grasp each other's arms and disappear.

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Left alone in the Three Broomsticks, Severus and Percy fill each other in briefly on whatever the other may have missed. Percy does not have a long update; his father is recovering, albeit more slowly than he would like. Severus, on the other hand, has no shortage of complaints about Harry to pass the time.

Severus also has nothing kind to say about Albus, who apparently lost his temper at Severus when Severus tried to bring up the topic of Horcruxes and shouted that Severus must put aside his pride and trust that Harry will do the job assigned to him by destiny.

"The boy is a blithering fool," Severus hisses angrily. "And Albus is ruining us with his blind trust in him."

The plan, it seems, is for Severus to remain in his post as Headmaster and discreetly help Harry along his task, "though if I knew what it was, it would be far easier." Percy, listening to Severus mutter to himself, is struck by how *personally* offended the man is by Dumbledore's clear preference for Harry. He supposes he would feel the same, if for years he alone had Dumbledore's trust, only for Dumbledore to switch abruptly to a sixteen year old boy, son of the love of your life and your worst enemy.

In fact, Percy is a bit relieved when Andromeda and Narcissa return. Andromeda nods triumphantly, but they cannot examine the Horcrux too carefully; they must Obliviate Narcissa, implant her fake memories, and return her to Malfoy Manor, where the Dark Lord is, thankfully, absent.

It is only later, inside Grimmauld Place, that they regard Andromeda's finds somberly.

"I think I can use this for Sirius," Andromeda says, motioning first to a small golden dagger. "But I will have to do some additional research, first. I think it is a sacrifice knife—it must be imbued with generations of Black blood. It would work best with Bellatrix's blood, but perhaps mine will work instead."

Severus nods, holding out his hand. After a hesitant second, Andromeda gives it to him. "The runes on the hilt are very old. Be careful. We can afford to lose Black; we cannot afford to lose you."

"Well, your use for me has finished," Andromeda says wryly, reaching for the dagger.

"We have not yet found the locket."

Andromeda acknowledges the point with a faint smile. "You and I have not spoken very often, Severus. I admit I never liked you, nor particularly trusted you."

Percy flicks his eyes nervously to Severus, but the other man merely inclines his head, perhaps more familiar with the Slytherin way of speaking.

"But I must thank you. Even if Narcissa does not recall today's events, the knowledge that she was willing—is willing—to help us is...fortifying." Andromeda pinkens slightly and turns away, secreting the dagger away in her robes. "I owe you a debt."

They seem content to stare at each other for another long minute, but Percy has waited for hours, and he cannot wait any longer. “The Cup, Madam Black. Please tell me you found the Cup.”

From the same pocket of her robes she retrieves Hufflepuff’s famed cup. Percy’s first thought is that it is very small, its delicate handles made of several intertwined strands of the thinnest gold. It looks incredibly fragile, as if even a small drop may shatter it into a million tiny pieces.

It is also most definitely a Horcrux. Percy can feel the cool breeze of Tom’s magic, cutting through the air and numbing his lips and the back of his teeth. His arm aches, and he finds himself covering the Mark without thinking. Wrenching his hand away, Percy swallows roughly and reaches out a trembling hand.

“No,” Severus orders, grabbing his wrist roughly. “You may not touch it.”

“Severus—”

“You are the most vulnerable of us all,” Severus says harshly. “You have spent months with his Horcruxes; years, even. I will not allow you to interact with another. Stay back.”

Andromeda watches curiously. Aware of her gaze, Percy feels his ears flush red, but he avoids looking at her directly. He is not a child to be scolded, or even to be protected. “I have every right to be here, *Snape*.”

“You have no right to endanger yourself needlessly, *Weasley*. None of us will interact with the cup.”

“But the sixth Horcrux—” Percy begins.

“How would we even interact with it?” Andromeda breaks in. “I presume it cannot speak.”

They all return their attention to the artefact, which gleams under their attention, even in the dark room.

“Perhaps we can use the cup,” Percy says eagerly, thinking of the Elixir of Life. “We ought to at least consider the possibility. Smith said a single berry could feed an army. The diadem still told the truth, did it not?”

“Did it?” Severus inquires acerbically. “I seem to recall all it did was embarrass us both.”

“You *wore* Ravenclaw’s diadem?” Andromeda asks incredulously, but Percy barely hears her.

“You treat me like a child,” he says accusingly to Severus. “*I* found the diary. *I* found the diadem. *I* painted the portrait. *I* learned of the locket and the ring. What have you done? Nothing.”

“I seem to recall I have saved your life several times over,” hisses Severus back. “Not to mention that I was the one that brewed the potion for the portrait. I seem to recall also that it

was necessary to neutralise the portrait because *you* allowed it to use your father's magic as fuel!"

Percy shakes his head incredulously, feeling the stirrings of rage crest over his body. "I could have destroyed it. You just wanted the glory. Tired of being in Dumbledore's shadow, are you? Tired of watching your master fawn over another boy? What does that feel like, Snape? Knowing Dumbledore prefers James' son to you?"

"Enough," tries Andromeda, but her words are tinny and far away to Percy, who can think only of his rage, kindled in his stomach and making its way up his throat. He'd thought he was *special* to Snape, that Snape *valued* him as a partner. To learn that Snape thinks so little of him, that Snape thinks of him as a burden to be rescued, as a pathetic wizard without a chance of success…

"If we were to list the people Albus prefers to you, we'd be here all night," Severus says bitingly. "All six of your siblings, I imagine, and the Granger girl, and the rest of the Order besides. Albus still does not trust you. He will die without trusting you, and you hate that, don't you? You hate that he will never know what you've done. How powerful you think you are without him."

Andromeda clears her throat. "What destroys the Cup, then?"

"I am not a failure," Percy insists. "*I* was the one to learn of the Horcruxes, *I* was the one to find them, *I* was the one to bring you with me. *I* will be the one that deserves the glory, while you die in the shadows, Snape, alone and penniless and worthless."

"Does the theory suggest Dark spells or Light spells? I'd think Light spells, but then again, Severus did say *he* neutralised the last one."

"Poor Percy Weasley," laughs Severus, his mocking tone utterly unbearable to Percy, who clenches his fists angrily in response. "Poor Percy Weasley, who thinks Tom *cares* about him. Tom does not care about you, or anyone. Tom does not think you are smart, or intelligent, or worthy of very much attention at all. Sixteen year old Tom was smarter than you, wasn't he? Even at sixteen, he pitied you."

"Don't pity me!" Percy roars, thrusting his wand forward. "*Do not pity me!* You *will* respect me, or I will *force* you to respect me!"

"*Lux quod ardet quod caelum!"* Andromeda cries, and Percy is thrown to the ground as the ceiling shakes and lightning flashes down, gathering around Andromeda, the electricity crackling through the air. Andromeda whips her wand around once, twice, three times in a circle above her head, the light thrumming around her in a frenzy, and then she brings it down solidly in front of her.

An agonised scream bursts from Hufflepuff's Cup, a loud and shrill and desperate sound that thunders through the room. Percy cries out, clasping his ears desperately, as scream turns into a snarl of rage. He can barely look up; the entire room is filled with light, so harsh and bright that it is painful even to glimpse out of half-shut eyes. He becomes suddenly aware that behind the scream he can hear chanting, like the chanting from the cave, but louder and

empathetic, and for a second he hears the exultant horn of war ring out, a clear and hopeful and triumphant sound, and he is gladdened.

The cup rises straight into the air. Andromeda yells, an unearthly sound, and the light around her pulses—and then the cup shatters into gold dust that burns when it settles cruelly on Percy's skin.

"Evanesco," Percy says automatically, and the dust disappears from his person.

When he looks up, he sees Snape, covered in the same gold dust, staring at Andromeda with an expression that can only be described as surprised.

Andromeda looks wind-swept, her eyes glowing with exhilaration. When she sees Percy and Severus staring at her, she preens, running her fingers through her tangled curls. "When I left the Black family, I figured I could no longer lay claim to being a Dark witch," she says by means of explanation. "So I decided if I was going to be a Light witch, I'd be damned if I wasn't a fearsome one."

Percy shakes his head. He suddenly feels incredibly empty, and more than the slightest bit hungry, as if when the rage filling his stomach disappeared, it took everything he'd ever eaten with it. His ears are ringing still with the sound of the horn. He looks over to Severus, who looks equally shocked.

"Seems like you two have some issues to work out," Andromeda says tartly. "But I say for the time being we ought to have a drink. I think I just destroyed part of the Dark Lord's soul."

***

At work the next day, Scrimgeour eyes him suspiciously. "You look happy," he says. "Why do you look happy?"

"It is a beautiful day," Percy says. Even the knowledge that he must now plan Scrimgeour's death does not seem to dampen his mood. That's another Horcrux destroyed, and one with *Light magic!* For the first time in what feels like years, Percy feels like they may have a fighting chance. After all, couldn't he fake Scrimgeour's death?

"Hmm," Scrimgeour grunts, unconvinced. "Andrew Jofunser was found dead last night, along with his wife and two year old daughter."

Percy's good mood disappears instantly. "What? But Jofunser was the one—"

"Planning the next evacuation, yeah," Scrimgeour confirms darkly. "We have to assume they know which Muggleborns we've still left to evacuate. So wipe that idiotic smile off your face, Weasley."

Percy had been the one to make the list of the Muggleborns to evacuate, and Percy had been the one to give it to Jofunser, though Jofunser, of course, had believed it was from Scrimgeour directly. If the Death Eaters have the list now, then not only is Jofunser's death on his conscience—not to mention his two year old daughter—then so would all the deaths of the Muggleborns the Death Eaters were sure to find with haste. The Dark Lord must have known about this. It likely is what had precipitated the sudden order for Percy to murder the Minister of Magic.

Percy shakes his head in denial. They are alone in Scrimgeour's office, so he feels safe enough to say, "We've got to warn them. Everyone on the list."

"I've assigned Aurors to it, but told them to act discreetly," Scrimgeour says. "Maybe Jofunser held out."

Percy grimances, knowing intimately the torture that Jofunser must have endured. He knows from experience that Jofunser would not have held out, not for long, especially if his poor wife and daughter had been tortured too. "They'll know we're planning something."

"They'll be after me." Scrimgeour considers the thought and then visibly waves it aside. "Look, if I die, I'm hoping they elect Shacklebolt. I'm nearly certain he's Dumbledore's man, but to be honest, that might be the best outcome. I want you to work with him, Weasley. Say what you have to say, drag my name through the mud, but finish what we started here, is that understood?"

Percy finds to his surprise that his throat is tightening. Despite everything he's come to trust Scrimgeour, trust and even admire his gruff demeanour and relentless pragmatism. "I've been ordered to plan your death," Percy says without thinking. He winces immediately, but it is too late. Scrimgeour narrows his eyes immediately; his eyes flick to Percy's arm; and then he lets out a big sigh, leaning back in his chair.

"Please tell me you're a spy, since if you were a real Death Eater, I don't think I could stand the disappointment."

Percy is startled into a laugh. "A spy," he confirms.

"Dumbledore?"

"Not exactly."

"Well you're not bloody well *my* spy."

"Let's say I'm McGonagall's."

"Does she have any more of a plan than I know?"

"Not that I'm aware," Percy confirms. "She is working with Moody to organise the evacuations. I've been helping, quietly, when I can, though I did much of the initial legwork and have left them to execute. Dumbledore's giving Potter information, something he won't tell anyone else. Nothing I've found out, otherwise I would have told you, Minister."

"A bloody sixteen year old is not going to single-handedly save a country," Scrimgeour says with a grimace. "But maybe with Dumbledore training him, he'll have a shot at it. Well, what were you thinking? Faking my death, I hope. Who're they going to pick to replace me?"

"Pius Thicknesse."

"*Pius*? The twerp couldn't lead a department, let alone a bleedin' Ministry, let alone a bleedin' Ministry struggling to control a coup in favour of a Dark regime."

Percy ducks his head to hide a smile. Scrimgeour is truly a man he can respect. "Well, I think the plan is for me to Imperius him."

"*You?"* Scrimgeour asks incredulously. "You're more of a twerp than Pius. Quite the promotion for you, Weasley. Perhaps you ought to consider joining the Dark Lord for real; it seems your career prospects are considerable, all for the small price of your dignity and free will."

"I imagine the wages are better, too," Percy says impudently.

"Weasley, plan my death properly and I'll give you a raise," Scrimgeour says with a gruff laugh. "Let me think about where I ought to hide."

"Out of the country, I'd think."

"Too much happening here," Scrimgeour says, shaking his head. "I may be a Slytherin but I'm no coward." Percy cannot entirely hide his surprise. Scrimgeour laughs. "That's right, I'm not one of your precious Gryffindors. I'm smart, and I'm slippery, and I think big. I think I'll take over for Jofunser. We'll need more evacuations if I'm to be killed."

"You should talk to McGonagall," Percy says meaningfully. "But you didn't hear it from me."

"I don't hear anything from you. You're my assistant. Fetch me some coffee. When you come back, I'll tell you how I'm going to die."

“Well, I have some ideas on the matter,” begins Percy, and Scrimgeour surprises him with a laugh.

“I didn’t expect much of you, Weasley, but by Merlin it looks like I was wrong.”

***

"Andrew Jofunser, wife, child dead. Helping Mudbloods evacuate, apparently. Scrimgeour to pick replacement. He is greatly demoralised. Will update."

Lucius Malfoy has an office in the Ministry, which means Lucius Malfoy has a box to receive mail, which means Percy can send him confidential memos and they will be automatically

forwarded to a matching box in Lucius Malfoy's manor.

He never replies to Percy's messages, which Percy takes to be a good thing. Occasionally Percy will hear references to the news he gives, either from Severus or the Dark Lord or during the infrequent meetings that Percy is summoned to, which he also takes to be good. It is a balance, deciding what information to tell Lucius.

It is easier to decide what to tell McGonagall. He writes a brief summary to her every night, including highlights from the Ministry and from the Death Eaters if applicable. He feels he can trust her to take appropriate action, to stay the Order's hand if it becomes necessary. McGonagall, for instance, knows that Percy has been instructed to kill Scrimgeour and Imperius Pius. These missives he leaves in Regulus' room when he can, though he isn't sure how often she is able to make it to Headquarters to receive them.

Percy is not entirely sure what she does with the information he provides, but providing it feels like absolution. He has not yet been in a situation where he's had to do something absolutely unforgivable, but hopefully he's saved enough lives now that in the grand scheme of the war, his debts are balanced. Didn't he warn the Jefferson family that they were being targeted for Muggle baiting? (Didn't he give Andrew Jofunser a valuable piece of information but not check to ensure his family was suitably protected?)

The rest of Percy's day is taken up by the ramifications of Jofunser's death; they need to warn everyone else on the list, supervise the cleanup of his house and contact his relatives, arrange for a proper funeral, and ensure all of the other safehouses remain properly safe. So when Percy's Mark burns around his arm toward seven o'clock, he for a wild second contemplates not answering the call.

But it would be his funeral next, and he doesn't think Julian—the Junior Assistant—would be up for the task of faking Scrimgeour's murder.

To his surprise and horror, the Dark Lord has summoned him to what is essentially a private audience with a subset of the Inner Circle: Severus, Yaxley, and Lucius. Percy gingerly takes a seat at the long, glossy table and has the acute feeling of being a child dining with the adults for the first time.

"Have you decided how you will kill Scrimgeour, Percival?" The Dark Lord asks without preamble. His magic today feels more focused, alert, and his voice is steady. Next to him, Nagini hisses softly, her tongue flickering out, as if to sense Percy's lies.

"Not entirely, my Lord," Percy says apologetically. He flinches, waiting for the curse, but Voldemort only purses his lipless lips in disappointment. "I am thinking about the merits of staging it publicly or privately. Publicly may inspire fear, but there is also something frightening about knowing that not even the Minister is safe at home."

"I would say privately," Lucius says. "Leave no trace. Let the public wonder how you breached his defences."

"But then Weasley would be an obvious suspect," Severus says, raising an eyebrow.

Yaxley shakes his head. "So? We'll have the Ministry by then; nobody will dare accuse him."

"Weasley is valuable to us because the foolish little Order might trust him if he comes to them with a sob story," Severus snaps. "Once Albus is dead, we will lose our position in the Order. They will never trust me again."

Yaxley scoffs. "We won't *need* to focus on the Order, we'll have the Ministry and Hogwarts. What can the Order do?"

"Give people hope," Percy says quietly. He flushes when he becomes aware of Voldemort's attention, crawling over him like ants attracted to old Potions ingredients, left negligently on the workstation long after a class has ended. "As long as the Order is out there, people will have hope. We can't just forget about it and assume they'll do no damage."

"I agree," says the Dark Lord silkily, and whatever mutinous retort Yaxley had is instantly silenced. "So you will kill him in a way that cannot be traced to you. It should be easy for a wizard of your merit.

Despite himself, despite everything, Percy cannot help but feel a flash of pride at the praise.

"And Pius? What will you have him do?"

"Well, it's delicate," Percy says, his confidence bolstered slightly. "If he is too obviously allied with you, my Lord, people will grow resentful, and we do not want to quell an uprising. If he is too obviously allied with the opposition, we cannot justify allowing him to live. I believe he must appear as if he will take up the mantle of Scrimgeour and protect the British people—but, clearly, the riots were a work of a few angry men, and the Dark Lord is merciful, and it is in our country's best interest to ally with him, and align our goals with his." His voice begins to take on the pompous cadence that he uses internally when writing speeches for the Minister. "We need safety, economic prosperity, and equality. It is not fair that those who steal our magic can steal our prosperity, too; it is not fair that our children grow up afraid to express their opinions, or that your family matters more than your magic. The Dark Lord would have a fair and just society, where *magic* underpins *merit*. He will protect us from those who seek to take power away."

Percy stops suddenly, but all four wizards are watching him silently.

"You've become good at this, Mr. Weasley," Lucius says, breaking the silence first. "I thought I recognized your influence in some of Fudge's speeches."

"Whenever he had an intelligent thought, you mean," snorts Yaxley, who clearly has read the room and decided not to antagonise Percy any longer.

Voldemort inclines his head, watching Percy thoughtfully, one hand on Nagini's cool body. "Do not let me down, Percival," he orders softly. "As you said, we will be a society of merit, and there is no place for those who do not have it."

***

When Percy goes to see the Dementor again, he is surprised to realise he can recognise which of the three is *his*, insofar as a Dementor can be his. They all look virtually identical, save for the size, or the way their robes tatter into shards at the ends. But he recognises the magic of his Dementor, somehow.

This bolsters him enough to bring the remains of his father's life ward and a bit of the dust from the Cup that Severus had cleverly kept and say, hoping his voice does not waver, "Do you know what this is?"

The Dementor floats closer to the portrait, reaching one scaly hand out of his billowing cloak, and laying it just above the surface of the crude charcoal sketch. It breathes deeply, the mist curling out of the dark abyss of its mouth, and the stretched canvas flexes in response, as if alive.

It is an artefact of soul magic, says the Dementor, its hand continuing that strange, rhythmic flexing. ***It has your magic, and that of another of your line, that of that dust you carry in the other hand.***

Percy clenches his toes but extends the small bag of dust that he'd brought. "Do you…do you know what a Horcrux is?"

I do not know that word, the Dementor replies. Just when Percy is tightening his lips in disappointment, the creature continues slowly, ***But I can sense that what you've brought once held a torn soul.***

"Yes," replies Percy eagerly, some of his anxiety dissipating. "The Dark Lord, he made six of these Horcruxes."

The Dementor is silent, hovering in front of Percy, the stench of rubbish and rotting flesh seeming to intensify as the Dementor mulls over Percy's revelation.

Then, slowly, the Dementor's hand curls into a fist, its long, skeleton fingers creaking with the effort. ***He dares,*** thrums the Dementor. Its rage is tangible; Percy shivers, the ghost of Fred's laughter in his ears. ***He dares to use our magic for his purposes.***

"Your—your magic?"

Soul magic is our burden and our privilege, as we have said for centuries, thunders the Dementor, breath blowing foully over Percy's wrinkled nose. ***To die is an ancient process, and to shepherd your deaths our ancient prerogative. Humans may not meddle in these matters. To kill another prematurely is to presume the ultimate arrogance. To split your own soul to evade death entirely…***

As before, Percy is struck by the eloquence of the Dementor, by the evidence that these strange, silent creatures have the concept of duty, of ancient history, of arrogance. How

wizards have spent decades presuming Dementors are nothing more than beasts—Percy is ashamed of his own compliance, of his unwillingness to ask additional questions. Imagine what he could have learned from such a creature over the last decade, had he but asked!

Percy also recognises a cue when it presents itself so nicely. "I want to destroy them. But this life ward, it is that of my father." He hesitates. "Do you know what I mean by that? One of my line. I…care for him and wish to see if the Dark Lord's Horcrux has some of its soul linked to my father."

One of your line. The Dementor hums thoughtfully and then uncurls its fist, pointing to the two Dementors that hover overhead. ***These are of my line.***

Percy gapes at them. So perhaps they are smaller because they are *younger.* And to think, they are descendents, or family, or whatever it means to the Dementor to be of the same line…"Amazing," he breathes without thinking, before flushing in embarrassment. "Sorry. It's just…I've never learned much about Dementors before. Thank you for telling me that."

Your kind does not think to ask. The Dementor seems to regard Percy. Something about the tilt of its head suggests contemplation. Percy straightens up and hopes that whatever the Dementor is searching for, Percy proves equal to it. ***There is no soul in this item save a link to the human of your line. But three lines of magic are intertwined. If you were to die it would not kill the others, but I do not know what else may occur.***

"Can it be reversed?"

I do not know. This is a question of wizard magic, not mine.

Percy purses his lips. At least his father has not been inextricably linked to Tom's soul, though it sounds like he has been linked to Tom's magic. But at least this sounds like a problem Percy will be able to solve. The relief makes his knees feel weak, but he firms his legs as best as he can. "And the other Horcruxes—soul fragments. We need to find them, and to know whether the Dark Lord is making more."

I would help you, if you will destroy the fragments. But I cannot leave unless accompanied by a Ministry employee.

Percy wants to groan in frustration. If he *knew* where the bloody Horcruxes were, he wouldn't need the Dementor. And he can hardly show up to the next Death Eater meeting with a large, deadly shadow. For a second, Percy entertains the idea of going about the country like Harry and Ron and Hermione, Horcrux hunting with the strangest of bedfellows. Then he shakes his head. He is being watched too carefully for such a thing.

Unless you free me.

Percy knows what that means: bring a person to be killed before his time. But how can Percy do *that?*

***

Percy, on Narcissa's request—and with the Dark Lord's grudging approval—manages to invent an excuse to visit Hogwarts, ostensibly to inspect the defences of the school in advance of the Death Eater's attack, but in reality to see how Draco is doing.

Exhausted, is the word that Percy immediately thinks. Draco looks so tired that he does not even notice that Percy is quietly tailing him beneath a Disillusionment Charm. Percy follows Draco through the castle, all the way up to the Astronomy Tower, and then stands there quietly while Draco looks contemplatively over the railing.

Percy is tempted to turn around and leave; he can report to Narcissa that Draco is alive, and he can report to the Dark Lord that none of the Aurors that Scrimgeour demanded be installed inside the castle are allowed past the Great Hall, and he can report to Scrimgeour that Dumbledore is, once again, absent, but something in him tugs with sympathy for the sixteen year old in front of him. Percy doesn't spend a single day without hearing Harry Potter's name, but nobody ever speaks about Draco.

So he cancels the spell, and clears his throat, and raises a shield charm to parry Draco's curse.

Draco rolls his eyes when he sees who it is. He straightens his shoulders, and Percy watches as he visibly reaches out and grabs any vulnerabilities floating in the chilly air, reeling them in until his face is expressionless.

"Did Mother send you here?" Draco demands, entirely accurately. "Or the Dark Lord?"

"Draco, you've really got to start checking my identity," Percy chides. "Your mother sent me, but I wanted an excuse to come."

"Why? Do you think I'm not up to the task?"

"I know you're up to the task," Percy says softly. "That's what worries me."

Draco eyes him mistrustfully, and then barks out a sharp, harsh laugh. "Don't tell me you're a traitor," he says incredulously. "Actually, go ahead, tell me. I've learned a new spell from Potter, and I've been itching to try it out."

Percy has revealed his secret to far too many people of late, so he only squints at Draco and says, "How's your Occlumency?"

"You *are* a traitor, aren't you?" But he doesn't raise his wand. Percy does not believe for a second that Narcissa Malfoy allowed her son to nearly reach his majority with a Dark Lord living in his house without ensuring said son had Occlumency shields worthy of the Black name, but he extends his magic quietly and is gratified to feel his mental intrusion bump up against cold, impenetrable walls. Not a subtle defence, but hopefully an effective one.

Percy worries his lip and then steps forward, crossing the short distance to the rail. He leans over it as well, squeezing his toes to rid himself of the instant vertigo that stiffens his body when he sees the dizzying drop. "I am inherently selfish," he says honestly. "I want to live. I want my family to live. They're blood traitors, but they're family, and I feel honour-bound to hope they survive."

Draco snorts. "Well, the state you're in, only one of those is going to happen."

"One could say the same about you." Draco bristles, but Percy continues talking, raiding his voice slightly. "I spoke to your mother."

Draco sneers, "Don't tell me *she's* betraying the Dark Lord too," but Percy can hear the tremor in his voice all too well.

"She cares only about you," Percy says calmly, taking a calculated risk. Even if this conversation were to get back to the Dark Lord, Percy thinks he has read the situation correctly. Voldemort knows perfectly well what kind of woman Narcissa Malfoy is, and what is keeping her bound and loyal. Nothing Percy is saying will come as a surprise. "Everything else is extraneous. She serves the Dark Lord because your father serves the Dark Lord, and because she believes her service will keep you safe."

"It will keep me safe," the boy insists. "I'll be the one who killed Albus Dumbledore."

"And you won't live to see twenty, not with that as your legacy. Potter nearly killed you in a schoolyard duel. He's got quite the crew of followers, doesn't he? You won't last very long if everyone loyal to Albus Dumbledore is out for your head."

Draco hesitates, the expression on his face quite clearly indicating he'd only allowed himself to think about his perceived glory. "But the Dark Lord will protect me."

"As long as you live as the man who killed Albus Dumbledore, you'll be a threat to him. Maybe not while you're young, but when you get older. You're the Black heir *and* the Malfoy heir. You're smart and powerful and good-looking. You're a leader amongst your peers. Harry Potter hates you personally. You've not been raised to kneel at another's feet; you've been raised to take control of your family's heritage. Don't lie to yourself, Draco. Your father is only alive so long as he makes it abundantly clear that he is subservient to the Dark Lord, or do you think he enjoys handing over his manor to another man?"

"Why are you saying these things?" Draco exclaims angrily, turning to look at Percy with cold grey eyes. Percy has seen those eyes on far too many people of late, and the delicate chin, and the strong imperious nose. "What do you want from me?"

"I want you to *live*," says Percy emphatically. "Merlin knows why, but I do. Our fathers are second cousins once removed, you know. I reckon that makes us something like family." *We were almost brothers,* he thinks, but of course he does not say that.

"I can't betray the Dark Lord."

"No," Percy agrees, hiding a smile at the way that Draco starts in surprise. "You can't. Nor should you, not when he is so clearly more powerful than Dumbledore and his little followers. But let Snape kill Dumbledore, Draco. Defeat him—Disarm him, maybe—so that you may take your reward, but don't be the one who kills him."

If *Draco* is the rightful owner of the Death Stick, it makes some things easier. For one, Percy can easily defeat him if it becomes necessary. For another, he could likely engineer a situation such that *Harry* defeats Draco, for now that Percy and Severus think that Harry may need to get the wand in the end, they would never truly be defeated by Harry, since they would want him to win the allegiance of the wand. It is the same reason why Dumbledore presumably never asked Harry to duel. The Elder Wand must be *won*, not given, and so the only person left to be truly defeated is Draco.

"*And,*" Percy continues, "You can come to me, Draco, for anything. I will not betray you. I promise, Draco."

"I don't need your help," Draco insists stubbornly, but he looks thoughtful, and so Percy counts it as a win.

***

"Look after him, Myrtle," Percy says an hour later, sitting once again in her bathroom. Percy cannot even remember the last time he spoke to Myrtle, but the chill of her ghostly form is comforting, and the bathroom looks very much the same as it always does. If Percy squints, he can pretend he is eleven years old, fired up with righteous purpose. Merlin, he misses those days.

Myrtle nods solemnly. "It'll be soon," she says darkly. "Dumbledore is nearly dead, I can sense it."

"Next year, I need you to keep an eye on things. Work with Ginny—she and Neville Longbottom will start some sort of resistance group. I likely won't be able to come back to Hogwarts at all, next year, but please do what you can to keep them all safe."

"I will," Myrtle promises solemnly. "All of us will. The ghosts, I mean. I'm going to tell them the truth, once Snape becomes the Headmaster."

"They won't betray us?"

Myrtle shakes her head. "Our loyalty is to Hogwarts," she says simply. "To the students. Ghosts don't like being around death, you know. Those myths of ghosts haunting graveyards are just that...myths. If anything, ghosts would congregate around cemeteries to feel the warmth of the grieving families. The ghosts won't support the Death Eaters, not if they harm the children of Hogwarts."

Percy finds to his surprise that his eyes are wet. "Myrtle, if this is the last time I see you, I want you to know that I'm so proud of you, and I'm so grateful that we became friends."

Myrtle sniffles too, and the pipes creak ominously. "Shut up, Percy. You're not going to die—not yet, anyway. You can't die before you release me from my *mortal coil*."

The way that she exaggerates the phrase makes him smile, despite himself. "Not even if I return as a ghost?"

"You've already lived two lives, Percy. Don't come back as a ghost. Will you promise me that?" Myrtle hovers in front of him, her eyes serious behind her glasses, and suddenly Percy can see a glimpse of the woman she might have become, if Tom Riddle had not stolen her life from her to extend his own.

"I promise. I know I've not been researching how to free you, but do you want me to? I've not forgotten *that* promise, though I admit I have been…busy of late."

"Snape will need me next year," Myrtle says, self-assuredly. "He gets into his own head like you do. Someone needs to remind you two of the bigger picture."

Percy snorts in acknowledgement. Then, "Myrtle," he says, casting his gaze around the bathroom, as to not see her face when she responds. "I've not shortened the war at all, you know. In fact, I might even have lengthened it."

Percy feels the cold susurrations in the air as Myrtle moves, but he keeps his gaze carefully away, landing on the far stall with the broken door rather than the sight of her face, so familiar to him and yet so difficult to bear at times. "What are you asking me, Percy?"

They both know what he is asking, but he forces himself to say it bravely nevertheless. "Was it even worth it?"

Myrtle flies at him, and he flinches despite himself as her cool form passes through his body. The feeling is like being plunged in very cold water, and as he gasps for air once she's passed, he finds to his surprise that he feels rejuvenated. Hovering in front of him, Myrtle's eyes are bright behind her thick ghostly frames, and when she speaks he can feel the echo of her breath on his face, not quite air, but something tangible nevertheless. "Yes," she says fiercely. "You may not have shortened the war, but by Merlin, Percy, what you're doing is helping people save their lives. Tell Cedric that you wish you hadn't come back, or Sirius Black, or any of the Muggleborns who may have a hope in this war that they didn't have last time."

"But—" begins Percy, thinking dispiritedly of the long decade behind him.

Myrtle narrows her eyes. "Get out of your own head, Percy. This isn't an exam, where you have to receive a certain score to feel good about yourself. There aren't any *Outstandings* when it comes to saving lives. You're doing your best, and you're giving people chances they didn't have before, and you're helping Harry with an incredibly miserable burden, even if he doesn't know it yet. Whether you save one person or ten or one hundred, you're doing

something with your life this time, and that's a lot more than you can say from last time, given what I've heard of the old Percy Weasley."

Percy snorts, Myrtle's brusque telling-off cheering him, as it always does. "Cheers to that, Myrtle."

Speaking with Myrtle gives Percy the strength to face McGonagall and retell a highly edited version of the events that led Percy to glimpse what he believes may be part of his soul, or at least something in the general proximity thereof. Of course, he does not mention Tom, nor his father, nor the Horcruxes, but makes it sound instead like one of the many *experimental* methods he was using sent him into a trance.

"I shan't tell you off for this incredibly dangerous use of stimulants," says McGonagall archly, "given I believe you won't be any more inclined to listen to me now than you were in school. Regardless, what you say is quite interesting. I admit I do not have experience with this myself, of course, but I believe what you are describing is a manifestation of your magic similar to your Occlumency shields. The Patronus is an expression of soul magic highly influenced by your current state of being; the Animagus is a reflection of your true form, or as we call it, the central tenants of your being; your Occlumency shields are a magical manifestation of your mind; and this seems to be something else entirely, though along the same lines."

"So perhaps the location I am seeing could change, similar to the Patronus," says Percy consideringly. He cannot quite recall the Patronus he'd managed to send after Tom attacked him, but he does have a vague recollection that it was quite big, nothing like the tiny sparrow that used to peck reassuringly at his shoulders. A changed Patronus would track, given his current state of being is unlike anything he'd ever experienced in his past life. His Occlumency shields are quite fluid, though Percy is comfortable with the mental library he'd created. He searches for the feeling he'd had, that sensation of a cool breeze and fluttering leaves, of a large lake with a dripping willow tree, and feels that it is solid and unchangeable, more like the certainty of his form.

When he describes this vision to McGonagall, she raises her eyes and gestures toward the window in her office, overlooking the Quidditch field and sloping hills down to the Great Lake. "It would make sense to me that your magic is pulling in a representation of Hogwarts," she says carefully.

Instantly, something clicks inside Percy, and he feels rather idiotic for having missed the obvious parallels earlier. "But what does that mean? My soul is Hogwarts?"

"Your magic is choosing to represent your soul with a vision of Hogwarts," explains McGonagall. "For what reason, only you would be able to understand. My supposition is that your soul is as varied and complex as your mind, if not more, so you are choosing to represent it with a manifestation as varied and complex: Hogwarts. Perhaps if you had a different view of yourself, the image your magic chose would be different."

"If I was about to die, perhaps my magic would choose a graveyard," muses Percy.

McGonagall gives him a sharp look but does not respond, to which he is grateful, after he realises what his words sounded like when spoken. “Indeed. And I believe that with practice you may be able to interact with this manifestation, similar to how it is reported that people can physically walk through their mental shields.”

“I can do that,” Percy says suddenly. “I’ve been able to do that for years.”

McGonagall frowns. “You can…enter your Occlumency shields? I am referring to the ability to physically *exist* within your shields, to walk through them as if they are solid.”

“Yes,” Percy confirms. “It’s a library. I can walk through it, touch the shelves, and physically rearrange the books, if I choose.”

McGonagall looks at him with something like wonder, which makes him feel rather funny in his stomach, and also a bit embarrassed. He becomes aware that his ears are warm and glowing, and he adjusts his glasses nervously. But all McGonagall says is, “That…reassures me, Mr. Weasley, that you have the mental strength to face off with the Dark Lord without revealing to him your secrets. One day when we have time, I would hope to examine this ability further. To have such a skill, and at such a young age, speaks volumes to your magical abilities and prowess with mind magic.”

“Severus once mentioned that Occlumency is a type of Light magic,” says Percy, still feeling rather warm, and wishing that McGonagall would open her window. “Requiring a degree of self-awareness.”

“And rather more than that,” agrees McGonagall. “To have control over your magic, in the traditionally Light sense of the word, is to understand fully how your magic interacts with your being, to have clarity of vision and economy of energy, and to act purposefully and honourably.” She grasps the handle of her cup but does not raise it to her lips to sip, though she looks to the bottom as if the tea leaves may provide answers. “I am not surprised, though I am gladdened to hear, that you have a proclivity for Light magic.”

“Perhaps also for Dark magic,” he mutters, squeezing his eyes shut against a flash of golden light as it consumes an innocent Muggle, of a young girl in Hogwarts blindly following his command to fetch the diary from Ginny, of a line of dead mice, small and harmless and cold to the touch.

"Needs must,” says McGonagall crisply, and the words sound like the gust of wind that Percy was hoping for from the window. She clears her throat and then looks up from her tea cup, meeting his gaze solidly; McGonagall is a true Gryffindor, and she will not back down. "Albus is dying. Even I can tell, now. He won't confide in me, even if I press him. He does not trust me."

The glow of satisfaction from being right is less warm than Percy often imagined. Instead, he feels sorry for his professor. She, like Severus, devoted so much of her life to Albus Dumbledore, and at the end of his life, he couldn't even give her the honour of his trust.

"I need you to find the sword of Godric Gryffindor," Percy says, instead of telling her that. She frowns, and he hastens to explain. "It's real. Harry pulled it out of the Sorting Hat. Only a

true Gryffindor can summon it. If you get it, bring it to Severus."

"Why?"

"I cannot say. Please trust me, Professor."

She nods slowly. "I assume I am not to tell Albus?"

If Dumbledore thought the Sword was a Horcrux, it would be easy for him to have confirmed it already, wouldn't it? Percy hesitates, but in the end, his paranoia wins. The only way for them to know whether it is a Horcrux or not is for one of them to examine it themselves. “Please, Professor.”

McGonagall eyes him beadily. “I expect you to soon tell me everything," she says, as if ordering him to complete an extra assignment for homework.

"I will," he promises.

"And when you do, you may do me the honour of referring to me as Minerva. It has not escaped my notice that you now call him Severus. But I do not wish for you to take that step with me until we are on equal footing."

Percy looks down, chastised. "I will tell you," he promises again. "As soon as I am able.”

"Everything."

"Everything."

It is not a vow, but it feels something like it, and he knows that he will not be able to weasel his way out of telling her the truth for very much longer.

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When Percy next goes to Headquarters to meet Tonks and Cedric, he arrives a bit early, and is shocked to hear the familiar voices of his brothers echoing through the twisted stairways.

He freezes, hand on the brass doorknob, the door cracked just infinitesimally. He can hear Fred, and an answering echo that must be George, and the scolding tones of his mother rising above their banter. The words themselves are not clear, but he does not need to know the words. Just the sounds of their voices, overlapping, so vibrantly *alive*.

Percy sinks to the floor, his back against the doorframe, and his ear pressed against the small crack he leaves open with the door. There's a lower voice that he does not immediately recognize, and Tonks' brassy laugh. Is this an Order meeting, he wonders, and are they always filled with such clear joviality? Or had they agreed to meet up, perhaps for a facsimile of the weekly Weasley dinners his mother becomes so fond of after the war? Perhaps this is

where the tradition started, gathering whoever is still alive and well to exchange jokes instead of intel, to eat food with another person rather than hastily, alone.

This is what Dumbledore does not want you to have, whispers a voice in his head, and he would be hard-pressed to say whether the voice sounds like Tom, or just his own resentful murmur.

He does not risk opening the door further, or moving into the landing. Nor does he try an Amplification charm. Percy has been excluded from this ritual, by design or by accident, and he is too proud to eavesdrop so wantonly.

But he listens, and their voices have a curious impact on his chest, which feels simultaneously squeezed and loosened by the knowledge that his family is still alive and still happy and still blithely unaware of his presence.

He is still in that strange, brittle mood after the meeting concludes. When he hears footsteps outside the door, he scrambles to his feet, but not as quickly as he ought to have. Somehow, he's not surprised to see Andromeda on the other side. She gives him an evaluative look, likely guessing the direction of his thoughts, but says nothing except, "I am going to try and attempt the spell tomorrow. Albus agreed with me that Harry ought to attend, but otherwise the house must be empty."

Percy nods. He hadn't expected to be allowed to witness the conclusion of the Black family curse; family magic is notoriously fickle, and Percy is not closely related enough to the Blacks to want to risk his presence in the room. Even including Harry would be questionable, except that it seems they can all agree that Harry has a right to be there to witness Sirius' death or resurrection. "I will stay away."

"If we do succeed, I would recommend you tell Sirius some of what we are attempting," continues Andromeda. "Not all—in truth I do not know what to expect, whether he will still be sane, or whether he will be happy to see me if he wakes. But Sirius could invoke wards on the house to keep everyone out, Order or no."

Percy wrinkles his nose but nods. He hadn't considered that his access to the house might be limited by Sirius, rather than Dumbledore, but he supposes once Dumbledore dies the house will be entirely under Sirius' control. He will have to chart an appropriate strategy.

Andromeda nods briskly, as if to leave, but then she casts her gaze over Percy again and then something in her expression changes. Percy cannot guess what, but the look in her eyes makes him feel suddenly very small.

Then she smiles thinly. "Remus wants to marry my daughter."

Percy blinks at the apparent non-sequitur. So Remus must have been that extra voice, low and male. Perhaps this was Tonks' engagement party. His mouth feels dry at the thought. Andromeda's gaze seems to sharpen at Percy's distress, and he summons a joke in hopes of distracting her. "Probably shouldn't say that in front of Walburga's portrait."

Andromeda chuckles, some of the rigidity leaving her shoulders. "My aunt seems to be rather quiet, of late. The news that Regulus turned from the Dark Lord has been shocking to her. She was not a particularly *nice* witch, nor a kind one, but she cared deeply for her sons, though her version of care was not one I would hope to be subjected to myself. I tried the opposite approach with Nymphadora, though she has grown to be as willful and disobedient as I, so perhaps I failed in my task."

"Perhaps that is just the Black in her," says Percy with a small smile. He certainly can see Tonks in Andromeda, which is an odd experience, but one that makes him feel warm.

Andromeda chuckles softly, exhaling through her nose. "If there is one thing I regret about my decision in my youth, it is stealing my daughter's heritage from her."

"She is still a Black."

"Not like I was a Black," Andromeda says softly. "Not like Draco is a Black. My family was not perfect, but the age of my parents was soon to finish. Sirius, Regulus, Narcissa and I—even Bellatrix—stood to inherit a great legacy, but Sirius and I left it to those we knew would not care for it."

"Barty Crouch Jr. said something like that to me once," Percy admits. "He said that the Old Guard was nearly done, and we had to be ready to right their wrongs."

"That is always our children's curse," Andromeda sighs. "Our burden and their curse. That is why I originally agreed to mentor you, Percy. You understand that your heritage is both shackle and strength."

Percy nods somberly.

"I do not think she should marry Remus. Not because he is a werewolf, or at least not because he turns into a wolf once a month. My daughter is as changeable as the sea; I believe she can contend with him changing form. But he is old and tired, and his soul is scarred with pain. I do not believe he has ever known true love, and though Nymphadora is kind and loving, she does not have an unlimited ocean of love to give. Remus will take all of her love and still require more. I do not wish that for my daughter."

Percy, unfortunately, does not know Lupin very well, nor does he have any insight into his marriage to Tonks. "I believe he does love her, though."

"Love is both everything and nothing," Andromeda sighs. "We love our families, our friends. We love our partners but those like Nymphadora are capable of loving many. If I had not met Ted, if we had not fallen in love, we both would have eventually found happiness elsewhere, though the journey may have been more painful. I do not regret my decision but I am cognizant now there were other decisions I could have made. When you are young there seems to be only one path."

"Is he going to propose?"

"I asked him to wait until the war is over, one way or another. If we prevail, things will be different, and perhaps he will find the strength to care for my daughter as she deserves. If we do not, then I will protect her, and if he is a good man then he will understand their love will only damn her."

“From what I have heard, Remus is a good man,” tries Percy.

"Being a good man does not keep you from death," Andromeda says with an air of finality. "And in truth I fear for what is ahead. But if I squander my chance to redeem the Black family in life, I will devote my death to ensuring we succeed at this task."

This rings in Percy’s head as he sits in the kitchen with Cedric and Tonks, much later, after the fire has gone out and the room slowly darkens and goes cold. They mean to be cheerful, and he appreciates their time, but the room feels so empty, and he cannot help but contrast it with the friendly atmosphere that he glimpsed earlier. It has been so long since he was part of a gathering like that. Hogwarts, perhaps, if he had to think, and the early years of Hogwarts, before his peers began to avoid him assiduously.

As instructed, Percy does not go with Andromeda to attempt the ritual to save Sirius Black. He does not see Harry at all, in fact, though he is curious to see how their young Chosen One is doing after the events of the year. He does not trust Harry not to betray his involvement in the matter to Dumbledore, and he does not particularly want to involve Dumbledore, so close to the other man’s impending demise.

So he must content himself with a restless night alone in his flat. Tom is away, and the flat echoes loudly in his absence. Shortly after midnight, Andromeda’s large tawny owl soars through the window and deposits a small scroll on his table.

Percy frowns at it. Using an *owl* to report on this incredibly sensitive mission would not be his choice method of communication. He had instructed Andromeda to leave a note in Regulus’ room.

Her note is very short, and unsigned. Perhaps Andromeda thought that would be sufficient security.

Success. Tiring. All alive.

Then at the bottom, in a hesitant scribble, Andromeda had added:

I am back on the tapestry.

Percy’s eyebrows raise instantly at this last. Andromeda is back on the Black family tapestry? They had planned for her to use a variant of the heir-claim speech that is traditionally used at the conclusion of such conquests.

He supposes that what she says logically follows: if the magic accepts her in lieu of Bellatrix, then presumably it must recognise her as a Black, which means she would be reinstated on the tapestry.

What interests Percy is that Andromeda had not said whether *Sirius* was on the tapestry again.

Which *could* mean that Andromeda's place in the lineage now usurps Sirius'.

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Sirius' resurrection is the last positive thing to happen in May, or what's left of it. Tom spends most of the month away from Percy, furiously tearing through the portraits of Malfoy Manor in an attempt to discover what that last Horcrux may be. Severus reports that the Sword of Gryffindor is not a Horcrux, so presumably the Dark Lord used something else, *if* he managed to succeed. Tom seems certain that Voldemort has created another Horcrux, though he cannot explain satisfactorily to Percy why that may be so, and Percy supposes he must take Tom's word for it.

(Percy wonders if Tom is also avoiding him for the awkwardness that still lingers around the edges of their interactions, like a smattering of Dragon Pox pustules lining the edges of the face, or a cloud of invasive wispets humming in the still waters of a small pond. Percy supposes that it is for the better if they do not repair their relationship—certainly he is cognisant that he will have to one day destroy Tom, and never speak to him again—but Percy does find it terrible lonely, sometimes, in his flat, emptied of all portraits and therefore of company. Oddly, his flat feels far lonelier than Severus' house, perhaps all the more lonely for the ghosts of past misdeeds still floating in shadows and collecting in the dust under the chairs.)

Percy is summoned to Malfoy Manor and informed that Draco has fixed a date for the invasion of Hogwarts, a few days above the previous schedule, but right around the same time. Percy is not sure how Draco had managed to get all of the Death Eaters in the first timeline, but in this timeline he has managed to create a set of Portkeys which circumvent the Hogwarts wards by landing the invading wizards in the secret passageways of Hogwarts. The creation of these Portkeys would not be a very easy feat, and it certainly is not one that has escaped notice. Percy watches the Dark Lord's face as he processes Draco's plan, and feels nervous for the younger boy. For Draco to come to Voldemort's attention as a skilled, wealthy, charismatic young heir would not necessarily be a positive thing. Far better for the Dark Lord to believe Draco to be whining and weak-willed.

Percy will not be participating in the raid. Percy will be killing Scrimgeour, which works to his advantage, since people will look less closely at Scrimgeour's death if they are consumed with sadness about Dumbledore's.

"And then," the Dark Lord says with an exultant smile, "the world will be ours."

Percy makes the necessary preparations. Severus tries once more to speak to Dumbledore about the Horcruxes but is firmly rebuffed.

*I **need** to speak with you,* Severus writes that night, underling *need* several times. *He told me something very worrying.*

What?

I cannot risk writing it.

Percy's plan to "kill" Scrimgeour is simple and clear and worryingly effective, given he is plotting the murder of their most powerful leader. All Percy has to do is brew a potion (though he brews two, one a slow-acting poison and the other the Draught of Living Death, to have the memory of the first but the intention to use the second), *Imperius* the Scrimgeour house elf, and have Tonks take the place of one of the private Healers of the Ministry. None of these tasks are particularly difficult, especially for Percy, who enjoys close access to the Minister and his surroundings. Of course, Scrimgeour knows to expect a potion in his morning meal, but plenty of poisons are undetectable, and Percy would not need Tonks' interference if he truly were to kill Scrimgeour; her role in the sordid little play is to ensure Scrimgeour is noted as dead and to spirit away his body, even though a perfectly brewed Draught of Living Death simulates death so convincingly that even a talented Healer could be fooled.

In fact, it all goes off without a hitch. Percy is halfway through an interview on the steps of the Ministry when Julian discovers Scrimgeour, lurched over his desk, not breathing. The reporters follow on his heels, and there are several photographs snapped of Percy heroically trying to bring Scrimgeour back to life. Scrimgeour is carted swiftly off to the Healers and pronounced dead, and Percy is able to bar the doors of his office in his apparent grief, collect the materials intentionally left behind by Scrimgeour for Percy to turn over to the Dark Lord, and then return to the Dark Lord's side to report success. Percy does not know how Scrimgeour will go undercover, nor where he will be, nor who will know the secret of his feigned death. They had both thought it preferable to have Percy know as little as possible. Thus, the whole affair takes under three hours. The raid on Hogwarts has not even begun, given as it seems Dumbledore has left the school and taken Harry with him, so they are all obliged to wait for his return.

Percy is able to provide the Dark Lord with the materials from Scrimgeour's office and the memory of him brewing the poison and cursing the house elf. Then he provides the Dark Lord with a draft of tomorrow's *Prophet*, already beginning to come together, thanks to the opportunistic drive of the paper's current editor.

The Dark Lord laughs for a long time, looking at the photograph of Percy, rushing to Scrimgeour's aid. He hands it to Yaxley, who snickers obligingly and passes the scrap of paper on to the next eager wizard. Despite the forced delay, the mood in Malfoy Manor is jovial. Oddly, it reminds Percy of the night that Sirius Black broke into Hogwarts; there are no plushy purple sleeping bags, but there are dozens of wizards all but camped out on the floor, waiting to hear the news of Draco and Severus' success. The Dark Lord had announced he was going to take a force of twelve wizards to Hogwarts once summoned, and all of the Death Eaters are clearly hoping they will be chosen for the honour. In the meantime, the Malfoy house elves serve platters of food and drink, and the wizards jockey among themselves, the overall effect much more similar to the Gryffindor house common room

before a Quidditch game, rather than the refined, quiet gatherings that Percy had always envisioned.

Percy tries to slink away once he's given his report to Voldemort, but Voldemort motions him to stay with a scaly hand. By his feet, the snake hisses threateningly, and Percy does not move, though his Mark twinges painfully in response.

"Excellent, Percival," Voldemort says in approval, his voice sliding over the sibilant *c* in his praise. "Well executed."

"Thank you, my Lord," says Percy, bowing his head. There is a pause when Voldemort clearly expects Percy to say more, perhaps to ask for a reward or gloat about his success, but Percy stays quiet. He has seen the Dark Lord's mood turn quickly on those who think they are above reproach.

"You are proving to have use as a knife, carefully wielded, in areas that require subtlety," Voldemort continues after the pause, giving Percy the praise he had not requested. Several of the Death Eaters turn their heads at this, like animals scenting an enemy.

Unfortunately, far too many of the Death Eaters heard Percy's name, and combined with this public honour, Percy knows his tenuous claims of neutrality to certain members of the Order will soon be rather *untenable.* But of course that is what the Dark Lord wants, Percy realises, recognizing the self-satisfied smile on Voldemort's thin, lipless mouth. After tonight, there are no claims of neutrality. Either one declares for the Order, or one falls in line with the Dark Lord.

Percy waits grimly with the rest. He does not move from the Dark Lord's side, though Voldemort's attention soon turns to the other Death Eaters vying for his attention. He does not want to speak to any of them, hear their oily, dirty words, nor see in their expression the smug superiority of knowing Percy is the only one of his family to betray Dumbledore, soon to die.

Yaxley comes to stand next to him after he arrives, a full plate of food in one hand, and a tankard of frothy Butterbeer in the other. After exchanging a quiet congratulations on Percy's great feat of murder, the wizard senses Percy's black mood and falls silent, though he can't help but comment quietly to Percy on each selection as Voldemort makes his choices.

"Nott—*there's* a man I wouldn't let loose into a school of children," Yaxley mutters under his breath. Or, "Rookwood, of course. I'd have gotten rid of him after the prophecy incident, but I imagine our Lord still has use for him."

Percy remains silent, but it is only when Voldemort turns to Fenrir Greyback that Percy can't contain a small hiss of disapproval, thinking of Bill's mauled face.

Voldemort hears it, which ought to have tipped off Yaxley that Voldemort could hear his previous comments, too. The two wizards feel the force of Voldemort's attention like a stinging charm. Yaxley takes a slow, nervous sip of his beer.

"Yes?" Voldemort inquires lightly. Percy knows from experience that Tom's light, interested tone means he is more amused than angry, though of course that could turn on a heartbeat.

"Nothing, my Lord," Percy says hastily.

This is a mistake, as he knew it would be, though he couldn't help but try. Voldemort glides back to him, his robes trailing on the floor, with Greyback and his awkward, heavy stride just steps behind. "Do you have an objection to my bringing Fenrir, Percival?"

Percy is torn between further evarication and the possibility of openly deceiving his Dark Lord. He swallows. Tom would prefer to hear his opinion, expressed respectfully, but Voldemort is another beast entirely. Wavering, Percy chooses, and prays for mercy. "My Lord, I was merely concerned with the health of some of the children. Likely they will be running under foot, and I imagine the Order will rally soon to join, though I hope the confusion of Scrimgeour's death forestalls some of the Aurors. If you plan to take the school tonight, my Lord, then I would gladly lay down my life for that goal; but if you wish only to ensure that Dumbledore is murdered and the Order cowed, I would bring a set of wizards more…easily controlled."

Percy's mouth is dry by the time he finishes. Greyback growls and steps forward, his amber eyes flashing angrily, deeply set in his wide, scarred face. Unluckily for Greyback, he steps on the back of the Dark Lord's robes, who whisks himself away with an affronted gesture. Percy sees a flash of disgust mar Voldemort's face and knows that Tom's prejudice against werewolves has not worn off with time.

"You should not dare to presume my motives, young Percival," says the Dark Lord coldly. The other Death Eaters look at each other nervously; Percy catches their looks and has to resist the urge to back away slowly. "Fenrir was not to accompany us to Hogwarts, but rather go immediately to the werewolf community near Glasgow and inform them that Dumbledore will be dead before the next full moon."

For a second, Percy gapes at Voldemort. Then his instincts kick in and he inclines his head, murmuring, "My apologies, my Lord."

But the Cruciatus he receives thereafter feels lighter, infinitesimally so.

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It soon transpires that Voldemort has no intention of going himself to Hogwarts. Nobody allows themselves to question this, but Percy sees confusion on several unmasked faces. Percy reckons that Voldemort does not want to risk a challenge with Dumbledore on his own lands, in case Draco and Severus fail, but he has to admit it is odd. In fact, had Voldemort come back to Hogwarts at all, save for the Final Battle?

Regardless, once Lucius gives the signal, alerted by some Malfoy artefact shared with Draco, the twelve wizards chosen by Voldemort set out for Hogwarts alone. Percy has a suspicion on who, precisely, informed Draco as to the particulars of the secret passageways linked to the portkeys, but he can't blame her if his suspicion is correct. Although, Percy is not sure how Draco managed this task in the previous timeline, so perhaps he had discovered the passageways on his own.

Despite himself, Percy makes himself a plate of food, after an hour passes without word. He chats politely with the various evil and Dark wizards of their time and watches Voldemort as he makes his way around the room. It's an odd facsimile of the many Ministry events that Percy attends each month at Scrimgeour's side, and he wonders who plans these for Voldemort as Percy does for the Minister. The various wizards and witches in the relevant departments at the Ministry are so used to their tasks that Percy need only specify a date, time, and occasion, and they will do the rest, catering food, decorating the hall, issuing invitations. Is there a similar playbook put together for Voldemort?

Percy is just beginning to run out of room in his stomach for small crudités and delicate slivers of fish—though he is not hungry, he finds that having something to chew on dramatically reduces the number of things he has to say to the others—when the Death Eaters return, one by one, like fat raindrops rolling off a branch and landing solidly in a pond.

Draco, Lucius, Nott, Rookwood. A few others that Percy does not know. Severus, at the end, his face like a large cliff in the mountains, jagged and impenetrable.

"Well?" The Dark Lord demands eagerly. Percy is reminded strongly of Tom, recognizing the anticipation curled around Voldemort's shoulders, the way he flexes his fingers unconsciously.

"Draco held him at wandpoint, my Lord," injects Lucius eagerly, but all attention is on Severus, who sweeps a low, respectful bow.

"Dead, my Lord."

Percy inhales sharply. The gasp that travels through the room like wind whistling through the Forbidden Forest suggests he is not the only one who cannot resist an expression of surprise. Though Percy had known that Dumbledore was to die—and in this timeline known it was an inevitability, far beyond the Dark Lord's wishes—to hear the words so bluntly spoken, to see the glee gathering on Voldemort's face, to see how empty and still Severus keeps his expression…

Albus Dumbledore is dead.

"He said *please*, my Lord," says Severus quietly, tipping his head up expectantly.

They wait silently as the Dark Lord dives into Severus' head, reliving the final moments of his most hated enemy. *Please*. Percy imagines it and shudders. For the first time he realises perhaps why the Dark Lord did not go himself. How much more exquisitely painful would it be for Dumbledore to realise at death that his beloved spy was not his. How much more galling to such an arrogant, famous wizard to be killed by proxy, and not by the Dark Lord

himself. How much more torturous for Severus to be the one to cast the spell. Voldemort had always wanted Severus to do it, Percy thinks to himself sadly. Tacking on Draco had been a distraction, to torture Lucius and ensure Severus felt doubly beholden to the task. Perhaps the Dark Lord had subtly encouraged Narcissa to request an Unbreakable Vow himself.

Finally, the Dark Lord withdraws and laughs exultantly, his magic swelling. The chandeliers sway and clatter, and Percy's Mark pulses with the force of Voldemort's joy.

"Excellent, Severus," cackles the Dark Lord, and Severus inclines his head in a bow. Then Voldemort turns and spreads his arms wide. "Albus Dumbledore and the Minister of Magic are dead! Our power is unchallenged, our supremacy guaranteed! Tonight marks the first night of a new age, of my reign, of your time as my loyal followers to be rewarded!"

But all Percy can think about is the barely perceptible tremble in Severus' shoulders as he stands by the Dark Lord's side.

CULMINATION (1/?)

Chapter Notes

My apologies for the long wait!! Of course it's been a crazy few weeks at the same time I was hoping to carve out enough time for a deep revision of these chapters.

It's funny, in a way. I sympathise with Percy. I wrote most of the Hogwarts chapters in 2020, took an extended break, and then wrote the rest of the chapters in early 2021. Somewhere in 2022 I decided that I might as well publish what I had, figuring I would fix a few small grammar errors or plotholes. As I revised the chapters I started to change a few small things, here and there...I heard from you all, and changed a few more small things in response...added a scene here or there, or cut a scene here or there...and by the time I wound up looking at these chapters, I felt like the sum of all of those small changes was that most of what I already had didn't fit either tonally or with the updated plot.

So I'm still not 100% sure where the cards are going to fall with this ending. What I have so far is....long, so I hope you all are still interested. Please continue to share your thoughts, if you can!

CHAPTER ELEVEN: CULMINATION (1/?)

1997 — 1998 (Percy is 21 & 34, Severus is 36, Harry is 17, and Dumbledore no longer lives)

July 1997

Considering that Percy had lived once through the revelation that Severus Snape murdered Albus Dumbledore in cold blood, he reflects after a few days that he ought to have been more prepared for the ensuing chaos. Oh, he'd expected the public mourning—mass sobbing in the streets, scores of people calling in sick, ragged groups of Hogwarts alumni making pilgrimages to the castle despite the clear and present risks—and the spectacles, though admittedly he'd forgotten about the Dumbledore impersonators causing havoc across the British isles. Rita Skeeter's book hits the shelves on schedule, and Percy purchases a copy, though it sits unread on his desk. But he hadn’t considered how the Dark Lord’s followers might be taking the news that their hated enemy had finally been disposed of, once and for all. Percy attends only one of the revels and nearly is sick all over his new robes at the wild, jubilant carnage gleefully enacted by Dark wizards feeling gloriously unshackled by proprietary.

He'd expected some dirty looks, too. But in this timeline, everyone knows the middle Weasley child is a Dark wizard, or something approaching it. The photos of Percy heroically saving Scrimgeour have had the opposite effect than Percy had hoped, namely that half the Wizarding population seems sure Percy had been instrumental in the Minister's death.

Percy's flat is warded enough to forestall most of the owls he receives, though he continues to let Erroll through, and subsequently has no choice but to read the small scrolls from his twin brothers and parents, each in a very different tone, but both very difficult to read. His office at the Ministry, however, remains under a deluge of owls—some critical, some ingratiating, all unwelcome—until Percy, in a fit of pique, casts a strong animal repelling charm that causes even a family of mice living in Mathilda's old desk to flee with haste.

Percy attends Dumbledore's funeral with more than a mild headache, wondering grumpily why the Dark Lord even bothered to allow Dumbledore the honour, considering the Wizarding World is nominally Voldemort's already. He arrives early and takes a seat next to Thicknesse in the front row, unwilling to make even a perfunctory effort at socialising with whoever deemed it wise to attend such a fraught event.

Throughout the service, Percy stares silently at Dumbledore's bone-white tomb, thinking of the Elder Wand, and the tremble in Severus' shoulders, and a dark haired sixteen year old, his face filled twisted with hurt, bitter rage.

Behind him, the gathered crowd rustles and whispers like grass exhaling and inhaling with the earth's steady breaths. Harry is in the crowd somewhere, his green eyes dark with sorrow and hatred. So are the rest of his siblings, and both of his parents, and the rest of the Order besides. Percy does not turn to check. Better if he does not see their faces, though whether the precaution is for plausible deniability or his own mental fortitude, he cannot say.

After the mermaids pay tribute and the centaurs salute and Hagrid's foghorn sobbing ripples through the still summer air, Pius stands to give his first official speech as Minister. The crowd watches him without much interest. As Percy had predicted, Dumbledore's death is far more interesting than Scrimgeour's, though Scrimgeour is one of only four Ministers killed in the line of duty.

"We are gathered here today to mourn the death of a great man…"

Percy has not yet *Imperioused* Pius. Pius is a thin, reedy man with dark hair and an unseemly goatee, and he seems to be stupid enough to genuinely believe the Wizagamot voted him to replace Scrimgeour. Percy doesn't know exactly how Lucius and Yaxley managed to tamper with the official voting results, but he has no doubt that Pius was not even on the docket, let alone the clear winner. Shacklebolt seems to be taking his loss well; he'd volunteered to liaison with the Muggle Minister, which seems like a fruitless thing to do and an excellent way to draw negative attention to himself, but perhaps the Order has some plan that Percy does not know about that necessitates close contact to the Muggle government.

Severus is not at the funeral, of course. Percy longs to speak with him, but Severus had not responded to Percy's messages, each agonisingly constructed. Percy can only imagine what he is feeling, the roiling mix of shame and guilt and self-righteous anger. It saddens him, and the empty page in their linked notebooks saddens him even more.

"... Hogwarts will mourn its leader but will not give into grief…"

Many in the Wizarding World are also likely asking themselves the question, *what next?* It is a very good question, and one that Percy does not have the answer to any more than anyone else. Dumbledore is dead. Harry is vulnerable. The Dark Lord spends most of the year chasing after him, Percy supposes, but he can't imagine it would really take Tom an entire year to find one seventeen year old boy if that had been his sole focus. What else is the Dark Lord seeking? What will Tom?

"...the Ministry will remain strong. I vow to you that we will do what it takes to prosper, to rise like phoenixes from the ashes…"

Percy winces at that last metaphor. That hadn't been in the materials he'd prepared for Pius. Perhaps he will have to *Imperius* the man sooner than planned.

Finally Pius is finished, and the crowd applaudes tepidly. Percy will have to work with Pius. He is not a strong public speaker, nor particularly appealing to look at; the first order of business will be a proper haircut and some new robes.

Everyone at the Ministry seems to be holding their breaths, waiting for a horde of masked Death Eaters to storm the castle and take the king. Lucius knows better than that, Percy expects. Last time it had taken months, a series of small but purposeful moves, to strip the freedom of movement and magic from their society, bondages loosely tire together link by link until they tighten with a snap. As Percy had said to the Dark Lord, the transition to the Dark Lord's reign will seem more natural if it comes from a genuine place. The Wizarding World—or at least the British corner of it—is in shock today, and will doubtlessly be in shock tomorrow, but forced to contend with an obvious intruder and their shock could easily turn to anger.

And, Percy notices, they are looking to *him* for cues on how to respond. It makes sense; he has served three Ministers now, and he *is* a Weasley, but he's the *Dark* Weasley, isn't he? Percy walks through the halls and hears the whispers stop abruptly. He promotes himself to Senior Undersecretary; he may as well get the raise he deserves if he's going to suffer the infamy. With the extra money, he goes out and refurbishes his wardrobe, buying silk robes lined with gold fringe. To anyone that asks, he smiles thinly and reminds them that everyone that does their job well can be assured of success, and anyone who may be tempted to…slack ought to consider alternate employment.

From Junior Assistant to Senior Undersecretary in three years. Not too shabby, if he does say so himself. Maybe this time next year he can claim the Prewett seat on the Wizengamot and *really* get started on his career.

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But while Percy is planning and scheming and worrying about the state of Pius' hair, the timeline is inexorably changing around him, so slowly and so insidiously that he nearly does not notice until it is too late.

The first sign that something is wrong is when Percy tries to Apparates into Grimmauld Place the night after the funeral and is met with what feels like a solid brick wall. Coughing, he picks himself up from the floor of his flat and tries again. Still nothing. Percy knows very clearly that the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix are at Number 12 Grimmauld Place, but he can't seem to fix his mind on the location to Apparate.

When he tries to send Tonks a coded message, folded into a delicate swan and sent on lily-white paper, she sends him back an envelope filled with its ashes. When he goes by her desk later that afternoon, he’s informed by the nervous trainee filling her desk that she’d quit. Percy does not want to risk sending Andromeda a letter nor arriving at her doorstep unless strictly necessary, but neither Black woman makes any effort to contact him, which makes him feel strangely hurt.

Priscilla Diggory similarly closes the door in his face when he arrives late on Saturday night, a similarly coded letter in hand, for her to smuggle to Cedric. She does not bother to open the door even to his pleas and then finally he turns and marches away, though not before dropping a small package on her doorstep, containing some books that Percy would claim had been Amos’ and found in the Minister’s office, had anyone followed him and questioned his presence at her doorstep.

Percy does not risk contacting any of his family members, of course, nor does he have any idea of how to communicate with McGonagall without access to Headquarters. Thus stymied, Percy resorts to nagging Severus until the other man finally agrees to meet with him in his house, given they are the only two keyed into the wards. It would probably not do to *regularly* meet there, but Percy has been branded a Death Eater by Dark and Light wizards alike, so he does not think it particularly unwise to be seen consorting with Severus Snape.

Except, he supposes, looking at Severus’ deeply lined face, Severus murdered Albus Dumbledore, so even among Dark wizards, he would not be considered particularly *safe* company.

Percy wavers with the idea of asking after Severus’ health, but he values his own too highly to open what will undoubtedly be a conversational game of Exploding Snap. Instead, he tries for a less controversial topic. “We need to speak to Harry. We need to know what Dumbledore told him.”

Severus looks tired and haggard. “The bloody mutt,” he hisses out heatedly. “We should have killed him ourselves. If he’s called on Black family magic, we’ve no hope of entering Headquarters.”

“Do you think they are well? I don't know why they thought it necessary to flee so suddenly.”

Severus does not care. Or rather, it would be more accurate to say Severus does not care about Harry Potter's wellbeing for the present because Severus is incandescent with rage now that Dumbledore's portrait has awakened and revealed to him some key truths.

"He expects me to help him *behind the scenes*," Severus spits out angrily. "*Behind the scenes.* It would help, one would think, if Potter did not think me a *murderer*."

"What of the Wand?" Percy asks impatiently.

"Draco disarmed Albus," Snape confirms. "Albus looked surprised, too; I think he was expecting me to do it. Of course, it matters not if Draco is the master of the Elder Wand if we cannot hope to orchestrate a situation where Potter defeats him."

"That's the least of our worries," says Percy, flapping his hand. "And you're *sure* the Sword is not a Horcrux."

Percy had quietly kept the contents of Dumbledore's will: the Snitch and the little Muggle toy and the book, at least. He'd tried to bring it them to the Burrow, but the house had been quiet and empty, the windows creaking in the wind, with only his parents to fill the multiple groaning floors. Percy had tried every spell in the book but had to finally conclude that the ghastly figure with red hair peeping out of the top floor window was none other than their ghoul, having a bit of fun.

"If I cannot recognise a Horcrux by now I do not deserve to be hunting them," Severus spits out, prickling visibly. "I do not know why Albus wanted Potter to have it, and his bloody portrait won't speak. All he says is that it's important for me to give it to the boy, which again, would be easier, if I had a *way to track him*." Severus pauses and then spits out, angrily, "He still does not trust me. I believe he told Potter precisely what all six Horcruxes are, but he still will not say the word to me, nor validate my suspicions."

"And before?" Percy asks urgently, seeing from the flaring of Severus' nostrils that the window in which to extract useful information is fast closing. "You said before you had something you needed to tell me."

This has the unprecedented effect of stopping Severus in his tracks, despite what undoubtedly is an unstoppable swell of rage building inside his body. Severus shakes his head, and sighs, and looks suddenly very old.

"The boy must die, and the Dark Lord must do it."

"*What?*"

Severus nods disgustedly. "Like a pig for slaughter."

Percy's mind flits furiously around everything that he knows about Harry Potter, but all he can say is, "But why?"

"I think it must be the prophecy," says Severus heavily. "*Either must die at the hand of the other.* Perhaps Albus does not truly think the boy can win in a fight against the Dark Lord and wishes to martyr him at the appropriate time."

"And once the Dark Lord murders Harry, we're supposed to what, carry on with the rest of our lives?" Percy demands angrily. "If he kills Harry, the war will be over, Horcruxes or no.

People are barely resisting the Death Eaters as it is."

It takes Percy by surprise in this timeline: life does not change very much for the average pureblood wizard, at least those willing to publicly fall in line with the new rhetoric. He supposes that is precisely the point; for all of the Dark Lord's strength, there are not enough Death Eaters to quell a serious uprising, but there are plenty to track down the Muggleborns unable to flee or fight. Percy finds himself a bit disappointed in the lack of outrage over the cessastion of one's civil liberties; in the last timeline Percy had agonised over every decision, feeling privately at night that he was nothing more than a traitor. In this timeline, he is not so self-absorbed that he fails to notice how nonchalantly many of the purebloods take the regime change.

Severus clenches his jaw angrily. “I am retelling only what Albus told me.”

Percy shakes his head, feeling his heart begin to beat combatively in his chest, a flush starting behind his ears and stealing into his cheeks. “Well, I didn’t listen to Dumbledore when he was alive, and I’m not about to start now.”

“Weasley—”

“No,” says Percy, firmly. “In my timeline, Harry defeated the Dark Lord. Perhaps it was the Elder Wand; Merlin knows Dumbledore couldn’t have imagined Harry would wind up owner of it. Presumably Dumbledore gave Harry the Ring, which makes him the Master of Death, according to the myths, at least. If Harry *has* to face the Dark Lord, he’ll do it at the end, after we’ve gotten the rest of the Horcruxes, and I won’t hear anything contrary, and that’s final.”

For a few seconds, the two wizards stare at each other, both taken aback by the fervour and finality in Percy’s tone. Percy has a moment of dawning horror when he realises he’s snapped at Severus Snape like a first year, his hands on his hips like his *mother*, but at the same time, he digs around in his stomach for strength and finds a ring of steel, though tremulous, lining his ribcage. Percy did not travel back through time, kill two people, tangle with the Dark Lord, and have His Mark branded forcibly onto his skin for Harry to die merely because a portrait of Albus Dumbledore decreed it so, and not even Severus could force him to change his mind.

Finally, Severus shakes his head, and something like a smile crosses his pale, thin lips. “You’re a bit like her, you know.”

“My mother?”

Severus snorts. “No, though now that you mention it, I see rather a strong resemblance there as well. No. Lily.”

Percy drops his hands from his hips, feeling as if the breath had been knocked abruptly out of his stomach. “What…what do you mean?”

Severus’ eyes turn inward, as he recalls a memory private to him, which makes Percy feel acutely as if he were intruding on a horridly personal moment. “She made up her mind

quickly—more quickly than you, I'd say. And once she did, she couldn't be budged, not for hell nor for high water."

Percy flushes. "I do too make up my mind," he defends weakly, scrabbling wildly in the air for something to say that would relieve the sudden intensity and awkward intimacy entrapping the two wizards like a net in the sky to catch pixies.

Severus raises an eyebrow. "I suppose it's my lot in life to be saddled with impetuous Gryffindors," he says with a gust of a sigh, sufficient to wash away the tension strung between them tautly. "Do you think you will be able to contact the boy? I do not dare try and expose myself."

Percy thinks dispiritedly of his failure to find the Horcruxes but gives a tiny nod. "We have no other choice."

"Quite."

At least Percy is almost positive he knows exactly where Harry is; the only trouble is finding a way to *talk* to the blasted boy.

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The Dark Lord's takeover of the Ministry looks something like this.

First, elect a new Minister, one that is malleable and easy to control. Install a Death Eater under him, but a Death Eater who seems like he may not be a Death Eater, so that those suspecting foul play are left stymied.

Then, over a course of a few months, ratchet up the intensity and deadliness of the Death Eater attacks, such that fear spreads like sticky honey over the country, and everyone's eyes are pinned to the Ministry, hoping desperately that the government has a plan.

Write a speech for the Minister, in which he strongly denounces terrorism, and reiterates the Ministry's commitment to power and might. Introduce a new set of Department Heads—and, slip in a new set of Departments—chosen for their tenacity, their vision and focus, and their strength. Do not mention that these Department Heads all have silver circlets on their upper arms; let them bare their forearms and exist above reproach.

Pass, by wildly popular measure, martial law, which allows the Minister to create a special branch of Aurors given licence to arrest without justification. Correspondingly, create a system of trials so that the misbehaving and criminals will be punished accordingly. Sacrifice a few lower level Death Eaters so that the public thinks the task force is truly out for their best interest.

(Ruling by fear is not tenable, though the Dark Lord often indicates it is preferable. Percy pushes for these measures not because he believes them to be ineffectual but because he

hopes that he is saving lives by moving the battlefield to the government and away from the streets. Only hindsight will tell him if he succeeds).

Stage a private takeover of the *Daily Prophet.* Do not yet change the content unduly—subtlety is key—but redirect the focus to hammer in that the only possible positive outcome to this war is a show of power by either side. Stoke fears of defeat but dangle the hope of victory, the best combination to keep the people compliant.

The later methods—pardoning the Death Eaters unfairly accused of treachery, shifting the focus of the trials toward Muggleborns, even redecorating the Ministry—all of those are slated for the coming weeks. Give people time to adapt. The Dark Lord is not cruel, after all, but rather *merciful.*

And the Dark Lord is not particularly concerned with Harry, either. It surprises Percy, at first, although he supposes that the Dark Lord's apparent nonchalance does not take root until after Percy inadvertently gives him an excuse to focus on other things. It is Percy, after all, who obediently reports to the Dark Lord that Harry Potter is holded up at the Black family manor in London with his blood traitor godfather. (Percy does not mention Ron nor Hermione, and the Dark Lord does not ask. He has only ever cared for Harry; anyone else is a distraction).

Percy would have liked to speak to Andromeda to confirm the strength of the Black wards, but when he finally musters up the courage to go by her house, he finds it silent, empty, and dark, without any trace of any of the Tonks. He can only hope they went somewhere proactively and were not taken unwillingly, though he rather thinks he would have heard of it if they had. The most likely outcome is that they too are with Harry, though Remus Lupin is still at large, according to Severus, nosing his way into any number of werewolf encampments in a futile effort to win them over to the Order's side with the power of love and good feeling.

But the Dark Lord had *demanded* Percy find out where Harry is, through any force necessary, and far too many of Percy's siblings remain frustratingly in the open, even after Percy forces the twins into hiding. So Percy tells the Dark Lord the truth, and nothing but the truth.

Harry Potter and his godfather are at 12 Grimmauld Place, but it is so heavily warded that nobody will be able to enter. The Dark Lord sends Narcissa and Draco to verify this, but even their Black blood does not allow them to enter the wards that Sirius Black has somehow brought upon his house like an impenetrable curtain.

Percy, his palms rather more moist than he'd like, nervously suggests to the Dark Lord that he let Harry be. "We know exactly where he is," points out Percy, nervously, "and you cannot Apparate inside the house, according to Narcissa, so he can't leave unless he walks out of the front door. And honestly, having Potter locked up there will be for the best." He pauses, anticipating a curse, but none comes. The Dark Lord rests one hand on his snake, drumming his long, thin fingers contemplatively on the scaled skin, but otherwise looking at Percy with some interest. Percy resists the urge to wipe his hands on his robes and continues, "Right now, there's a lot of outrage and fear over Dumbledore, my Lord. I fear that murdering the boy, rather than quelling a potential rebellion, might tip the rebels into outright opposition. In six months or a year's time, everyone will have forgotten about Potter. At that time, we can force him out, kill him quietly, and leave his body for all to see."

The Dark Lord's mouth stretches into that grotesque, thin smile, but Percy subdues a flinch with ease. Percy is not even tortured for this suggestion, and as he bows his way out of Voldemort's presence, it strikes him with a discordant clang that the Dark Lord seemed *relieved* at the knowledge he not yet face his next most hated foe.

Almost as if absolved from a difficult round of exams, the Dark Lord is thereafter gleeful, nearly giddy, accompanying privileged groups of Death Eaters to murder Muggles, leaving the Manor openly for the first time. Lucius Malfoy invites Percy for a drink during one of those times and it is as if a dark cloud has lifted off Malfoy Manor, though all parties are perfectly aware the reprieve is limited. To his surprise, Percy does not entirely dislike the Death Eaters; when their master is out, they lounge self-assuredly on the elegant chaise chairs, gleefully sparring with each other, their weapons of choice wit and sly comments rather than disembowelment charms and Dark curses.

They seem to enjoy Percy, too. Lucius and Yaxley and the rest all seem to think of him as a pet, a stray Gryffindor that wandered into their lair. Lucius glances sideways at his robes the first time Percy appears for one of these little chats (despite the gold trim!) and the next day an owl delivers an exquisitely wrapped package with four sets of dress robes, all considerably nicer than anything Percy has ever owned, even with Aunt Muriel's help, or the gold levied by the Philosopher's Stone. Yaxley teaches Percy how to distinguish between fine elf-wine and the shoddier goblin variety, and even Bullstrode—a quiet man with a sunken face but an electric tongue when he gets going—gives him a small book of common pureblood holidays and their meanings. All Percy has to do is take the advice he is given and display understanding of it, and they seem almost flattered by his interest. Their own sons learned these tricks years ago, baked into their blood and the haughty set of their spines, and now that they have reached their majority they do not have time for their fathers. Their sons are out with the Dark Lord while these wizards stay behind, no less evil nor Dark, but separate nevertheless. Percy would think some of these sons may resent Percy for having the privileged attention of so many of their elders, but they are used to dining with society's richest and most powerful, and most do not seem to disdain Percy the scraps of their parents' attention.

Lucius is not entirely cleared of derision, nor has he clawed his way back to the privileged seat at the Dark Lord's side that he used to occupy. But with Draco's triumph, he walks with his head held more high and some of the characteristic swagger back in his strut. Percy can tell from his enthusiasm to discuss the Ministry that Lucius—likely correctly—assumes that he has a small window of opportunity to decisively seize power from his competitors, namely Yaxley.

Draco and Narcissa grow quieter as Lucius grows more confident. Percy can see that *his* small window of opportunity to spirit Draco away from this mess is nearly shut, if it is not already. Draco watches him sometimes with wide, scared eyes, but he avoids him otherwise, as he avoids the other Death Eaters invading his home.

Percy waits for a moment alone with Draco and then asks, carefully, "Are you well?"

Draco shoulders past him with more force than is strictly necessary. "Is anyone?"

Tom, certainly, looks far from well, his painted face sallow and upset, though Percy notes with some unease that his portrait feels stronger every day, the corners of the frame sparking with magic, at times even when its occupant is not present. Severus and Percy have not further discussed when, precisely, they plan to rid themselves of the diadem Horcrux, but Percy is afraid it will have to be soon.

(He runs into his father, once, in the cafeteria of the Ministry. It takes Percy a few minutes to process that the man standing behind him in the line has greying red hair, but then he tenses, immediately on his guard, though he cannot resist the urge to reach out with his magic and assess his father's health. Decent, he supposes. Stronger than before.

People are almost certainly watching to see what he does. As long as one's bloodline is pure, one is allowed to continue working at the Ministry—for now. But adherence to the new Lord's political sensibilities implicitly allows some to rise above the rest. The two large, nasty-looking types sitting near the door and watching Percy with narrowed eyes are prime examples of newly hired Ministry employees who wouldn't have had a hope of even receiving an interview just a few years ago.

Percy gives his father one dismissive look and then turns back to look at the front. The safest thing is to say nothing and let people come to their own conclusions. People have not begun to denounce each other left and right, but it is likely to begin soon.

But his father cannot *resist.* "Your mother misses you, Percy," he says softly.

Percy's look of irritation is completely genuine. "She'd be better off channelling her activities into monitoring her other children," he says coldly.

The woman in front of Percy looks back, and then just as quickly, looks forward. Percy thinks he recognises her as one of the people who typically check in visitor wands at the front desk. But in this new world, anyone could be an enemy, and so despite the way that his stomach is grumbling, Percy steps neatly out of line and says, loudly enough for everyone to hear, "It's really not *done* to dine with blood traitors, don't you think?" and walks away as imperiously as he can, ignoring the way that his heart is beating as if it may stop at any moment.)

Tom looks very much *alive*, in a way that speaks more to the success of his extracurricular activities, rather than to Percy's skill as an artist. It has been quite a while since Percy recognised his own brushwork in Tom's form. His hair falls over his forehead with realistic curls, and shoulders tense visibly with emotion, and his pale cheeks flush suddenly with rage. When Tom paces in his portrait, Percy rather fancies he can hear the footsteps echoing.

But what makes Tom seem unwell is the crazed glint in his eyes, and the way that his eyebrows draw together, and how the corners of his lips compress until they begin to resemble his older, serpentine self. What makes Tom seem unwell is the way that he has begun to recite, out loud, the locations of the other Horcruxes to Percy, as if searching for the same clues that Percy has been trying to divine for years with little luck. He asks Percy again, desperately, whether the Sword of Gryffindor proved to be fruitful; he forces Percy to review his notes on the life of Regulus Black, in case they missed another clue; and he thinks through all of his other plans, as if so desperate to find the sixth Horcrux that he is willing to expose himself thus to Percy.

It flatters Percy, a little, and reminds him of the old intimacy once shared with Tom. But anxiety remains the prevailing feeling for Percy, even as he listens with interest as Tom shares some of his journey into the old and Dark magicks across the world. It is from Tom in these moods that Percy learns how Tom found Hufflepuff's Cup one day, during another humiliating house call, forced upon him by the smirking Borgin, who considered himself above consorting with pathetic wealthy women. It is from Tom that Percy hears again of Myrtle's death, and of Tom's father, and his grandparents besides. Percy faithfully records these stories to Severus, but neither of them can see what this Voldemort might have done, brought back to life by Pettigrew and Crouch.

Just as the rest of society is letting out a hesitant exhale, Lucius orders Percy to appoint Dolores Umbridge as the Head of the Muggleborn Registration Committee, and Percy finds the locket of Slytherin.

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September 1997

"*Dolores Umbridge*?" Tom repeats, outraged. "*Umbridge?* She doesn't even sound like a pureblood."

"She's not," Percy confirms darkly. Umbridge goes to great pains to conceal her heritage, but Percy had investigated her thoroughly when he learned she was a quasi-Death Eater. Pureblood mother, Muggleborn father, no siblings. Parents had died when Umbridge was quite young, and she had been raised by some great aunt or another, an obvious parallel that Percy finds easy to ignore, though he of course notes it in case he has to invoke a shared similarity with her to win her trust.

Tom scoffs loudly. Percy half expects spittle to fly from the surface of the canvas and land wetly at his feet, so great is Tom's disdain. "And she's wearing it *in public*? Where is *He*? Why is *He* allowing this?"

"*He* is celebrating Dumbledore's death," Percy says archly. He shares a look of incredulity with Tom. If Tom had celebrated Dumbledore's death, he'd done so in the privacy of his portrait when Percy wasn't there. Percy would hazard a guess that Tom resented that Severus was the privileged one to kill Dumbledore.

Percy cannot say that he disagrees. The Dark Lord could have required Severus to capture Dumbledore. He could have walked into Hogwarts, killed Dumbledore, and walked out without anyone being the wiser. He would have become the master of the Elder Wand. Of course Percy had thought at the time there were advantages to have the great Albus Dumbledore felled by his loyal servant, but Percy has seen the Dark Lord kill multiple wizards for insulting his pride. The only conclusion that Percy can really draw is that, even at the end, the Dark Lord was afraid that Dumbledore may defeat him, which is certainly the conclusion that Tom has come to, and the one that enrages him so often.

"Get it back," Tom orders, eyes narrowed into slits. "Now."

The problem, of course, is that Percy cannot rip it from her neck, nor can he *Imperius* her, given that both of them are being watched with an eagle eye. (Percy is congratulated formally by the Dark Lord when he burns down the twins' joke shop with enchanted flames that still flicker, weeks later. He had been Masked, but he'd made sure that Lucius, who had accompanied him, had seen Fred and George recognize him. Their looks of betrayal had seared, but their shop was not raided by more dangerous wizards, and with signs like U-NO-POO up in the windows, that was not a certainty). Percy also hesitates because he cannot help but wonder if Voldemort himself gave her the locket as a way to control her. Surely otherwise he'd notice that a prominent Ministry employee was openly wearing his Horcrux. Clearly, whatever Regulus had tried had failed, which makes Percy feel deeply saddened for that young, bright eyed boy, whose room is now locked away for good.

Giving Umbridge the Horcrux would be reckless—but the Dark Lord *is* being reckless, so convinced he is that his reign will be absolute. This way part of him would also be able to participate in the Muggleborn cleansing process. Percy can imagine that the Dark Lord intends for the Horcrux to completely possess Umbridge and then install itself as Minister.

So no, Percy does not immediately rush to apprehend Umbridge, but he does inform Severus, and he does appoint himself her senior scribe. This is, unfortunately, a position very familiar to him, and it is no easier to write the proceedings of each trial because he recognizes the details.

In fact, it is almost worse, given that in this timeline he'd made a token effort to save some of these people. He knows their names, their birthdays, their families, their Hogwarts graduation years. He hopes that Scrimgeour is off working with McGonagall and Tonks somewhere, but there are still so many Muggleborns and other blood traitors who *show up for their trials*, so many to send to Azkaban, so many to plaster across posters. Some of the victims of these trials *were* warned, as far as he knows. He wonders why they were stupid enough not to run.

(He wonders too, does the appearance of this Horcrux mean the Dark Lord is actively making *more*? Can he even bear to split his soul again? Will he just destroy himself? How can they ever be *sure*?)

Tom walks Percy through the best way to *Imperius* Pius. It is an odd experience to work with Tom now: he is unerringly helpful and polite, as if to prove to Percy by force that he *cares deeply* about him. Percy is equally friendly in return, as if to reassure him that he has no intention of destroying the sixth Horcrux once it is discovered. Something about their shared artifice saddens Percy, though he tries not to dwell too long on why that may be.

The best way to keep a constant curse over someone, Tom explains, is to give them simple but binding instructions. For instance, Percy tells Pius to act as normally as possible; to not reveal, hint, or otherwise insinuate that he is under a curse; to take no policy action without consulting with Percy; and to act as if he were a Death Eater.

These instructions are surprisingly effective.

They also have the side effect of making Percy a very visibly powerful person. Oh, nobody would dare postulate that Percy Weasley is controlling the Minister of Magic, but he *did* get several promotions in a small amount of time, and he *does* seem to have his fingers in a surprising number of pockets.

The result is that Percy strides powerfully through the Ministry for the first time in his life. His two assistants scurry after him nervously; he can quell them with a single derisive glance. When he meets Yaxley in the halls—for Lucius, much to the other man's disdain, has not yet been publicly pardoned—the other man treats him like an equal. Percy finds that he enjoys it, enjoys knowing more about the gears of the Ministry than most, enjoys knowing that his words are being repeated across the country, even if those words are cruel and cutting. (On his desk, at home, he's working through an Arithmancy equation to calculate the optimal number of instructions to incorrectly give Pius that will still allow Percy plausible deniability. Largely a theoretical exercise, given that neither Lucius nor the Dark Lord have told Percy to do anything other than endorse all of their other plans, but Percy knows that before long either wizard will begin to ask Percy to flex the arm of the government more powerfully, and he wishes to be prepared).

"You've made quite a name for yourself," Umbridge tells him one day, with the mutual admiration of someone equally hungry for power. She wasted no time in taking over Moody's cramped office, which is another thing that Percy wants to worry about, if he ever has a second to breathe and add another concern to his list. He hadn't heard about Moody quitting, but maybe the man felt it safer to disappear quietly, without notice.

He gives her the kind of smile he copied from Lucius Malfoy: all teeth. "I've learned from the best," he says meaningfully. "I was pleased to hear of your reappointment to the Ministry. It has been frightfully dull this last year."

"I admit I was peeved, at first, when Fudge fired me," Umbridge says, her toady lips widening into a smile. "But my sabbatical was quite...informative. A shame to hear about Mr. Crouch. I must thank you for our introduction." Umbridge has been very silent about where she has been for the last two years, and Percy does not ask.

"Excellent work on the Muggleborn Registration Committee," Percy continues, picking up a poster of Hermione Granger and regarding it thoughtfully. He does not want to speak about Crouch. "I am particularly impressed with how quickly you put together a list of suspects."

"It's obvious, once you know where to look," Umbridge says, preening. "Every Muggleborn is exposed the second they get their Hogwarts letter."

The *registry*. Of course. For all of Percy's familiarity with the mythical Hogwarts registry, he'd forgotten it would be such an obvious security leak. But how did Umbridge get access to it? She must have done something during her tenure as Headmistress of Hogwarts. Percy will have to inform McGonagall, if he can figure out how to contact her, now that Hogwarts is a fortress. Presumably she still trusts Severus, but he can't be sure. "And your command over the Dementors is exemplary. May I ask, what is your secret? I hate the creatures myself."

Umbridge taps Hermione's face with a manicured finger. "The Dementors have a basic understanding of negotiations," she says with a light laugh. "They grow tired of feeding on

the same feeble souls. They were quite willing to follow me once I explained to them that there would be a veritable feast waiting for them."

"Can they sense Mudbloods? Separately from Muggles or wizards, I mean."

Umbridge wrinkles her brow and then gives a dismissive shrug. "I'm not sure they care."

They probably can. Percy will have to add it to the list of questions to ask *his* Dementor, though given that it has been pressed into work in these Muggleborn trials, Percy's access to it has been rather limited. The Dementor and its two companions dive and swoop like ravens, spewing mist that gathers rebelliously around the wispy white Patroni, many of which are barely substantial. Dementors must be able to tell the difference between Muggles and wizards, at the very least, and hadn't the Dementor been able to identify the life ward belonged to a wizard of his line? Perhaps souls in a family have similarity to each other, as odd as a concept as that is for Percy. Perhaps his father's soul and his share some sort of...

Umbridge clears her throat with the obnoxious *hem hem* that is her unfortunate trademark. Percy rolls his eyes but prepares his dictating charm, staring blackly at the locket, which taunts him. Sometimes when he looks at it, he hears the whisper of Tom's voice in his head, which he has not otherwise heard in months. Several times he's tried to prompt her to speak of it, but she always smiles mysteriously and evaricates with skill he would not believed of such an obvious woman.

The Muggleborn woman on trial looks like a normal woman in her fifties: straggly, mousy brown hair, a face lined with worry but not age, her grey eyes watery and scared. She's put on some face makeup, obvious even to Percy's untrained eyes, as if the shaky black lines around her eyes would win her pity. If anything they serve to underscore that she is Muggle-raised; what witch wouldn't merely use a charm?

"I got it at Ollivander's," she sobs, her eyes fixed on the wand clutched tightly between Umbridge's hands. "When I was eleven, like everyone else."

Percy grips his own wand tighter in sympathy. He has to watch impassively as these trials occur, but some of the victims are harder to ignore than others. He doesn't know why this woman, with her pitiable green robes and matching hat, is so much harder to block out. Perhaps because she is so clearly shocked, so sad, as if she didn't imagine that this trial could possibly happen to her. Percy loathes the people that are so blind to the obvious signs everywhere—but they are so *pathetic* he finds it hard to ignore their plights. She should have run the second she was summoned to this farce. If she were a halfway decent wizard, she could have made it out of Britain with two days of metered Apparation, and if she were a Muggle, well, Percy now knows there is a vast network of Muggle transportation available, and he knows for a fact that the Death Eaters haven't yet thought to monitor them fully.

"Do not lie to me," Umbridge says coldly. Mafalda, behind her, shifts uncomfortably. Percy eyes her from behind his scroll. She'd overseen the arrest of a fourteen year old boy yesterday without blinking an eye, so he isn't sure why the trial of Mrs. Cattermole would be any different.

Percy doesn't even understand why Umbridge insists on *trials*. Yes, he'd advised the Dark Lord to launch his attack slowly, as to not ruffle feathers. A trap from the periphery is more effective than one clearly visible ahead. But the British society is not stupid. Nobody is found to be innocent during these exercises. The Ministry might as well just declare it illegal to be a Muggleborn and order capture on sight. It would certainly be cheaper.

For every trial, Umbridge must preside over a minimum of five other wizards, all capable of producing Patroni—certainly not a given for the average wizard—in addition to at least two Azkaban guards, and Percy. That makes a minimum of nine salaries to be paid out merely to watch an exercise in futility, a mockery of justice, and neither Percy nor Yaxley come cheap. Yes, it is one thing to run an evil empire, but payroll still needs to process pay stubs, and budgets still need to be balanced, and it seems like all of the newly instated Department Heads are completely unaware of the logistics required to head a department. Yesterday, Percy had overheard one man in the lifts mentioning to his friend that his grandmother's birthday was the following Wednesday, but he wasn't sure if he was allowed to take the day off. Percy had wanted to laugh, or maybe cry. The wheels of bureaucracy turn on, and grandmothers live another year, and clueless pureblood wizards are capable of ignoring the cessation of other people's freedoms long enough to think about their balance of paid days off.

A Dementor swoops close to the barrier, as if eager, and a chill drips wetly down Percy's back. He shivers and casts a warning charm, refocusing on the trial.

Mrs. Cattermole is crying, and Yaxley is fingering his wand, as if also contemplating how his reward for serving the Dark Lord is to sit in a basement with Dolores Umbridge while she viciously tears into Muggleborn witches. Or half-blood witches, as Cattermole is insisting desperately.

Umbridge leans forward and Mafalda jumps. Percy's eyes snap to her immediately. "That's—that's pretty," the other witch says weakly.

Umbridge preens, her fat fingers caressing the *locket of Slytherin* as if it were a cheap family heirloom. She babbles out some lie about the Selwyn family—as if—while Percy stares carefully at Mafalda. She's watching the locket hungrily, warily, and when her eyes flick up to meet Percy's, she blanches and drags her gaze away quickly.

Mrs. Cattermole's husband strides in confidently, flanked by two stocky men that Percy believes are from the Creatures Registration Division. Percy begins to rise instinctively, his eyes darting over each anomaly, something tugging at his mind…

"What is the meaning of this?" Umbridge snaps angrily. "Get out of here. These trials are private."

"Reg," cries Mrs. Cattermole in disbelief. Percy wastes a second looking at her in frustration; does she really think her husband can save her from her fate at this point? She'd be better off using the distraction to run.

Yaxley unbends his lanky body and pulls himself to his feet, twirling his wand between his fingers. He looks eager for action, and Percy can honestly not blame him. These trials are

mind numbing. "Gentlemen," he says coolly. "I would hate to resort to punitive action."

The man to the left of Mr. Cattermole throws his head back and bares his teeth. "Madam Umbridge has something of mine."

"Of yours," Yaxley repeats disbelievingly, as Umbridge's hand goes instantly to her throat.

Percy carefully steps out of the small scribe box, gripping his wand. He thinks he knows what is happening here, though it is so tremendously stupid, so asinine and impulsive, so *poorly executed* that he wants to strangle the Boy Who Lived and his godfather besides. He'd suspected this happened in the first timeline, but he'd never had it confirmed, and had forgotten about the incident in favour of other more pressing matters. If Harry has access to Polyjuice Potion, why was *this* his plan? They could have transformed themselves into a cleaning Squib, Stunned Umbridge, and made off with the locket without anyone to be the wiser. Percy had considered it himself.

"Get reinforcements," Percy snaps at one of the guards. He hesitates, and Percy pins him with a cold and imperious glance, an amalgamation from the many terrifying men in his life, and the guard blanches and nods. "Go with him," he orders to the other.

The Dementors swoop lower, eagerly, as the guards leave and take their Patroni with them. Mafalda has come to join the other three men, making it abundantly obvious to all parties precisely who is behind the Polyjuice. Yaxley and Percy meet each other's eyes; the Dark Lord would be *very* interested to know what is happening.

Percy jerks his head to the side, hoping Yaxley will leave and go to Malfoy Manor, thus buying Percy some time, but Yaxley shakes his head cautiously. If it isn't Harry, they'll be punished severely.

If it *is* Harry, that means that Harry has enough knowledge of the Horcruxes to identify the locket and plan an incredibly dangerous mission to retrieve it. Does that mean he knows of the others? He must. He may have already gone to the cave; Severus replaced the fake locket, including the note, and Sirius would have been able to put it together.

What else do they know?

Spell-fire crashes out; Hermione, or Mafalda, very sensibly aims at the three remaining guards, felling them easily. Whichever of them is impersonating Reg Cattermole goes to his wife's side, while the other two—presumably Harry and Sirius, come to think of it—battle with Yaxley and Umbridge.

"Weasley!" Yaxley calls out through gritted teeth, and Percy starts and sends a stunning curse toward Hermione, whom he privately believes is the most competent of the lot.

"They won't be able to Apparate here," he shouts back to Yaxley, widening his eyes meaningfully as he engages in a lacklustre duel with Hermione. Neither will the Dark Lord, though Voldemort almost certainly would be able to rip through the Ministry's wards if summoned. Hopefully Hermione registers that they too won't be able to Apparate unless they go back upstairs.

"That's mine, you bitch," shouts one of the men—Sirius, Percy would guess, and lunges physically at Umbridge, knocking her to the floor. Yaxley sends a nasty purple curse at Sirius, who yelps in pain but lands heavily on Umbridge. Why would Sirius think the locket his? Regulus, perhaps. So they must have gone to the cave and learned of R.A.B. What else have these four been up to, equipped with Polyjuice?

There's a scuffle; Ron and Harry seem to think Sirius' example was a positive one, and throw themselves at Yaxley. For a second Hermione and Percy share a look full of mutual irritation, and then Hermione stuns him with an apologetic widening of her eyes. Bloody witch. He stares at the ceiling with irritation.

Though his body is immobilised, he feels the chill spread over his chest and legs and seep into his fingers and toes as the Dementors swoop down in interest. His body may be still but his mind spikes with panic; surely they did not leave him to die?

Faintly, distantly, Percy hears Harry roar an *Expecto Patronum*, and the Dementor above his prone body retreats temporarily as if stung. But all too soon the black-robed creature appears in his field of vision, the mist building in Percy's open mouth, choking him on the frigid feeling of his own terror. The Dementor regards him thoughtfully, and for a single awful second Percy wonders if he'd been wrong, if this was not *his* Dementor but another one entirely, but then the Dementor flips over and leaves him be.

He's awoken in the next second and splutters back to life, his chest full and tight with the mist that snuck insidiously down into his lungs. He sits up, takes in the Ministry guards with blurry eyes, and then realises with a sickening lurch why the Dementors had ignored him.

All three of them are bent over Umbridge, feeding on her.

Her large body is tensed in terror, her fudgy fingers clenched into fists. Percy cannot see her face but he can see her body lurch violently once as something leaves her body, and then the Dementors soar back into the rafters, content with their prize.

He looks up and meets Yaxley's equally horrified gaze. For all that the other man is a murderer, he is also a wizard, and watching a creature *feed* on a witch's soul is enough to make even a Death Eater feel revulsion.

The guards that woke Percy and Yaxley are quiet. There is nothing to say. Clearly something awful happened here; clearly they will all be punished. Percy can already see what is to come. There is no need to mention it.

But the Trio, and the locket, are gone.

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"It was Umbridge," Yaxley says to Percy the moment they are alone. "You and I were not in the room. I've already...taken care of the guards."

Percy nods automatically. If Yaxley wants to cover their tracks, far be it for Percy to get in the way.

"We heard reports of a duel and came running, but it was too late. Potter had already left."

"How would we know it was Potter?" Percy cannot help but interrupt to point out. "I mean, if we weren't there, and Umbridge was... indisposed."

Yaxley swallows and nods. His eyes are wide and his face stricken with panic. Perhaps he has never seen a dead body before. Certainly he's never contemplated lying to the Dark Lord. Despite himself, Percy feels almost sorry for the other man.

"We don't say anything," Percy says gently. "We don't even know if it was Potter."

"But—"

"Intruders, in the Ministry. We were upstairs, discussing our strategy for Pius. After all, we do need to discuss the wording choice. I mean, *Magic is Might?*"

"It was Lucius," Yaxley objects automatically, and the normalcy of the conversation seems to calm him. Some of his customary cool steel slides into place behind his dark eyes. "Umbridge offended many," he agrees after a beat. "We'll say it was a disgruntled Mudblood —Pius can give a speech tomorrow."

"We might as well get rid of those blasted trials," Percy says with more confidence than he feels. "We both know they were a waste of time. After today, no Mudblood that's managed to escape our notice in the Ministry would dare answer a summons."

Yaxley nods slowly, as if he's practising how it will sound to the Dark Lord. "Umbridge was unhinged," he says smoothly, his voice oily. "We must have only the best serving our Lord."

Percy inclines his head. "I would have to agree."

So that's sorted, to an extent, though later that night it feels like Voldemort hammers individual nails into each vertebrae on his spine. The Cruciatus hums in delight and spreads like a web over his back, sending its creeping, probing fingers into the crevices between each bone. By the time it's over, Percy has bitten his tongue so hard that he swallows blood with every gasp.

But Voldemort does not bother to use *Legilimency*. He is distracted; Severus and Percy exchange a silent glance, watching as the Dark Lord reclines on his golden throne and stares thoughtfully into space. Whether it is the idea that intruders may have been in the Ministry, or something else entirely, Percy cannot tell. But the Dark Lord must not have known that Umbridge had the locket; surely he would be far more agitated if he thought Harry now had one of his prized Horcruxes.

"Well?" Severus asks after the meeting. They've chosen to meet in a Muggle town outside of London. Severus knows all sorts of seedy Muggle towns, apparently, and as they are both presumably being watched they can hardly continue to meet at the riverbank, though Percy certainly prefers it to the grime of the local tavern.

He discreetly casts a few Cleaning charms on the stool and the bar and the glass and then on himself for good measure. His magic is tired; it always is after a round of the Cruciatus. The last charm sulkily drips from his wand, and its effort is lacklustre at best.

"Harry's got the locket. The real one. Umbridge had it."

"Fuck," says Severus, with feeling. The curse is so unlike the man that Percy blinks at him in surprise; Severus, he notices, looks exhausted.

"How is Hogwarts?"

Severus answers with a single, cutting look that divulges much. "The Carrows are absolutely unhinged," he says, disgusted, though some of his customary eloquence creeps back into his voice. "To make matters worse, they are not unintelligent, either. They watch me carefully. It has not escaped the Dark Lord's attention that my...defeat of Dumbledore may give me airs. Not to mention the Dark Lord still expects me to provide him with all of the potions that he needs, which are seemingly innumerable."

"Where do they think you are now?"

"A brothel," says Severus blandly. Percy chokes on his tea—he can't stomach alcohol after a night with the Dark Lord—and the left corner of Severus' lips quirk into a small smirk. "I put a glamour on a Muggle as he went in."

They are, of course, disguised to not look like themselves, but Percy wouldn't have thought to plant a false trail on an unsuspecting Muggle. He clearly has much still to learn about espionage.

"Well, if Harry's got the locket, he must know at least nominally about the Horcruxes," Percy continues, his cheeks still tinted red. "I highly doubt he would have made it through the cave alone, so we can presume either Sirius or Dumbledore took him there. We know he learns at some point about the cup, since he breaks into Gringotts before the Battle of Hogwarts. He *must* know about the sixth Horcrux."

Severus purses his lips. "We cannot rely that he will know how to destroy the Horcrux. I managed to finagle out of Albus that he wants Potter to have the Sword because it is impregnated with basilisk venom. Obviously he plans for Potter to destroy each Horcrux with the Sword, as if he were a bloody action hero."

"Basilisk venom can destroy a Horcrux?" Percy asks in surprise. His mind roves over the applicable magical theory and he nods slowly. "I suppose. But Severus, the Sword—I do not believe it *is* impregnated with venom."

"But Potter used it to slay the basilisk, did he not?"

Percy flushes and examines the rough wood grain of the table. "Well, not exactly," he hedges.

Severus stills. The air around Percy suddenly feels several degrees cooler. "Explain."

"I was there that night," says Percy quietly, still not looking up. The table has a faint, sticky sheen, and Percy casts another Cleaning Charm that acts as desultorily as the last. "Hiding. Tom brought me there; he wanted to use Ginny as bait for Harry. Myrtle—and Dumbledore's phoenix—saved us. I wanted it to look like Harry had defeated the basilisk, so I smeared it in his blood and left it in his hand."

Severus' voice is cold as he demands, "Why did you not tell me?"

"I didn't think it was relevant," Percy says quickly. He looks at Severus' forbidding scowl and then sighs, reluctantly admitting, "I was ashamed. I nearly got them all killed."

"All information is vital in a war," hisses Severus. "You will get us all killed if you allow your infantile emotions to rule you."

"I—you're right," Percy concedes. He meets Severus' eyes bravely. "I apologise for lying to you. I trust you, and I should act as such."

For the briefest second, something passes behind Severus' black eyes; an expression of surprise, perhaps, or merely a discomfited blink. Then he gives a short, brusque nod. "Thank you. We cannot rely on the Sword; our only recourse is to find Potter and retrieve both the locket and the identity of the final Horcrux."

"Now that he's hidden in...in Headquarters, we cannot reach him." It is strange to feel the effect of the family wards now on the Black ancestral home; the Fidelius is still active and Percy knows perfectly well where it is, but if he tries to close his eyes and fix its location in his mind, his mind flows smoothly away from its knowledge.

"We will have to draw him out," Severus decides. "They will eventually leave, I believe, if Death Eaters are stalking their doorstep at every opportunity."

"Or they will shelter more thoroughly," Percy objects. In the previous timeline, the Trio had gone camping, insofar as running from the Death Eaters with a magical tent could count as camping. Percy had heard some of the story, of course, but not all of it; presumably after Dumbledore's death, they'd be unable to return safely to Grimmauld Place and instead traipsed around the country. They would not have been alone in that. Plenty of Muggleborns had similar stories from that year. "Particularly now that they have the locket. But presumably Sirius has some way to destroy it? Andromeda certainly did."

“And we shan't know. Bloody nuisance,” Severus mutters to himself, though it seems more automatic than fevered. Percy watches his sallow face contort and speaks up before he can convince himself not to pry.

“I’m sorry about Dumbledore.”

Severus' face twists and blackens instantly, and Percy hastens to keep talking.

"I'm sorry you had to be the one to kill him. I know that could not have been easy, and I wish you did not have to do it."

"I *hated* him," hisses Severus, but Percy has enough experience with hate by this point to guess at the undercurrents of what may be causing Severus' self-loathing and instinctive lash of anger.

Severus may have hated Dumbledore—but Dumbledore, like Tom, was an intoxicating wizard, and for years he must have trusted Severus as he trusted few others. Certainly by asking Severus to kill him and then take over as Headmaster of Hogwarts indicated the tenor of Dumbledore's feelings toward him. "I know," Percy says softly. "I'm sorry that you had to hate him, too."

Severus gives him such a scorching, searing look that it still burns faintly in Percy's mind, several hours later, as he tucks himself into the bundle of blankets in his bed and stares at the ceiling.

To turn his mind away from Severus, he turns it back toward the problem of Harry, locked like a dragon in a cave of his own making. Given that Sirius is alive, he has no reason to leave 12 Grimmauld Place, and Percy has no idea how to get word to any of the Trio. He tries sending an owl, but the letter is returned, unopened; likely the Black place is Unplottable. He'd never been anywhere in Grimmauld aside from the kitchen and that nasty dark room where they'd confronted Tom, but Percy does manage to find Grimmauld Place on a map and spends an uncomfortable evening in the rain waiting to see if they appear in the space between ten and fourteen. (Muggles are incredibly unobservant; why would twelve be missing?)

To say that Tom is incensed at the loss of the locket would be a massive understatement. Percy eyes the portrait with trepidation, but though Tom nearly screams in agonised rage, the frame contains the swell of magic that Percy can feel faintly through his Mark.

But when Tom accuses Percy of *losing* the locket, like it is nothing more than a mere trinket, like Percy had just stood by and watched Harry Potter make off with one of the precious pieces of Tom's soul, Percy cannot sit idly by and take the accusation. His fingers curl into fists despite himself, and his magic sparks angrily around him. "Don't you *dare*," he snaps back, unknowingly taking a step forward, so that his nose nearly brushes the paint. "I'm *trying*, Tom. Yaxley was there, and three bloody Dementors, and *Sirius Black*. Or would you have preferred I tip off the Dark Lord to precisely what we're trying to accomplish? I don't think he'll be too happy to have you returned to a body."

Tom scoffs, the sound harsh and guttural, so unlike Tom's normal silky tones that it sounds as if his anger pulls the noise unbidden from his throat. "The Dark Lord will not dare to say anything to me when I return."

But Percy hears the faint note of concern in Tom's voice, and it galls him on. "Do you think you'll just be able to waltz in there and announce to the Dark Lord that you're taking over his operations? He's liable to kill you right then and there."

“Maybe I’ll kill him first.”

“You’d do that? Point a wand at your own soul and banish it forever?” Percy says goadingly, shaking his head. “I know you, Tom, and if there’s any chance you can get your soul out of his body, you’re going to take it.”

“If I have the locket, I won’t need his soul,” says Tom boldly.

“But now what, Tom? Sirius Black has taken the locket into his cave like a bloody dragon. Even the Dark Lord himself cannot get into Grimmauld Place. Are you sure we can’t use the sixth Horcrux?”

“I’m sure,” says Tom venomously, before some of the anger melts from his face. He gives Percy a sideways glance and then turns to face the painted bookshelf behind him, a rougher rendering than the original portrait Percy had done, but still sufficient to allow Tom’s magic to bring books to life. “I…have a strong suspicion of what the sixth Horcrux may be, and we will not be able to use it.”

“Why not?” questions Percy immediately. “Tom, if you know what it is, that’s brilliant! It can’t be harder to get than the locket.”

“You can’t get it.”

Percy cannot help himself; the noise of incredulity he makes is loud, and rude, and as guttural as Tom’s scoff, just moments prior. “You don’t trust me,” he says flatly. “Still. Merlin, Tom, what do I have to do to prove myself to you?”

“You cannot get the last Horcrux,” says Tom, angrily, over-enunciating each word so that each lands like a slap on Percy’s skin, “because it is his *bloody* snake, and he keeps it next to him at all times.”

Percy takes a step back. “What?”

“The sixth Horcrux,” Tom says. “The snake.”

The *snake*?

Percy thinks of Nagini, always coiled affectionately around Voldemort’s body, and shudders with instinctive horror. “The *snake*? Can you even make a living being a Horcrux?”

“It is entirely foolhardy,” Tom hisses, and only then does Percy notice how utterly incensed the portrait is, how the very frame sparks with released magic. The snake. No wonder Tom had not said anything. The idea that Voldemort made his *pet snake* one of his beloved Horcruxes…it’s quite frankly embarrassing, and Percy knows in a flash that the faint pink stain on Tom’s neck is nothing more than shame that his counterpart had been so foolish.

Unless…“If the snake is a Horcrux, would that make it immortal?”

“Her life is prolonged, but not eternal, unless he was foolish enough to make his *pet* a Horcrux of her own,” Tom bites out. “She is protected, but not invulnerable. A *snake*.”

“How do you know?” Percy asks skeptically. Why would Voldemort entrust part of his soul into a vulnerable, living being? No matter how the Dark Lord protects the snake, at some point it would die of old age, and then what would he do? “Can you extract the Horcrux?”

Tom shakes his head. His left hand is clenched, and Percy watches warily as he squeezes his hand tighter, and the veins on his painted arm bulge angrily. “The ritual I devised relies on inert vessels. Are you stupid, Weasley? The life force of the snake would corrupt the structural integrity of the layering spells.”

“That seems—out of character for Him,” Percy says carefully.

“It’s utterly absurd!” Tom explodes. “What is he *thinking*? I have suspected for quite a while that something is not normal with that—with that *creature*, but it passed by my portrait today and I *felt* myself inside it. It is a Horcrux, Percy. I know it is.”

Percy shakes his head. “But *why?* It’s utterly illogical, Tom.”

“He *cares* for it,” Tom hisses venomously, and Percy suddenly understands why Tom is so very upset. Tom, as far as Percy knows, has never had a pet, or an intimate friend, or even a trusted partner. Tom, as far as Percy knows, views this as a strength. To think that he grew into the kind of person who would care for an animal so deeply as to entrust his *soul* within its life force would justify every paranoid thought Tom has ever had, and so strikingly highlight the difference between the diadem-Tom and the current Tom.

“And you cannot kill the snake without killing the Horcrux,” Percy says thoughtfully. So they will have to kill the snake too, which is, as Tom pointed out, a more impossible task than tracking down the locket, even with the Black family wards. The Dark Lord cares for Nagini like it is of his own soul, which now, Percy has to acknowledge, it rather is. “Can we extract the Horcrux from the snake? How did he even *put* the Horcrux into the snake?”

“I hope it was an accident,” Tom says with a bitter laugh, his robes whirling around him as he turns away from the shelf of painted books. “I cannot imagine *any* version of me would have done such an act on purpose. If I try to attack the snake, I risk killing the soul fragment therein rather than the beast. But to extract it will most certainly kill the snake, and as you said, *He* will already be predisposed to mistrust me.”

Something about Tom’s words echo in Percy’s head, and he sits suddenly on the couch, nearly missing it and crashing on the ground, his face growing pale as all of his blood deserts him, along with his courage, and his capacity for speech.

An accident.

Percy takes a series of deep breaths, focusing on the wooden legs of his kitchen table, and staring intently at his chair until the image is seared into his head. His heart is stuttering oddly in his chest, and he feels alternately warm and cold. An accident.

...power the Dark Lord knows not...

“Percy,” says Tom, calmly. Too calmly; Percy raises his panicked eyes to meet Tom’s, who is leaning forward and staring intently at him. “What did you just realise?”

“I’m wrong,” gasps Percy, feeling his throat begin to constrict around the truth, bubbling up his vocal chords, begging to be said out loud. “Let me verify it and then I will tell you, Tom.”

“No,” says Tom coolly. “You will tell me now, or I will kill your father.”

Percy shakes his head. Even the threat to his father cannot phase him. Oh, Merlin. It is all so stunningly clear to him, all so bloody *obvious*, but in Merlin’s name he has absolutely no idea what to do next. “I can’t, Tom.”

“*You will tell me now,* or your father will die, and Severus after him, and your mother next,” hisses Tom, and Percy’s Mark jumps with a pulse of Tom’s rage.

Can he tell Tom? But if Tom kills Harry before the Dark Lord can…or kills the Dark Lord first…it’s all a tangle in his mind, but the words are still pushing at him, insisting they be divulged, and soon.

(All except the last one, says Harry, his eyes distant. *That one required me.)*

But surely Harry had not known? Harry had been *alive*. Harry had lived through the Final Battle. He’d killed Voldemort, not the other way around.

So perhaps in *his* timeline, it had not been over.

“*What is it?”* Tom nearly howls in irritation, and Percy looks up, his lips moving, as if controlled by someone else.

“I think Harry Potter is a Horcrux, Tom.”

Tom’s rage surges through the room as if it were a being of its own. Percy gasps around the cold, icy feeling of the Horcrux’s magic lashing out, struggling to speak through it. “He speaks Parseltongue, when he should not,” he continues laboriously. “He can see into your mind through his dreams. We know you went to his house that night with the Sword of Gryffindor, intending to use his death to create your last Horcrux, but something went wrong, and you were felled for eleven years. It was an accident, like it may have been with Nagini. It’s too many Horcruxes, Tom, who knows what might happen if the Dark Lord were to try to create another? Magic has a mind of its own sometimes, we both know that.”

Some of the oppressive presence of Tom’s magic recedes, and Percy massages his throat, coughing. Whether it had been wrong or right for him to tell Tom was in the past, now. He’d made his choice and now he must stick to it.

“Harry Potter is descended from the Gryffindor line, I think,” Percy says into the silence. “He is your mirror. His mother experimented with dangerous magic, blood magic. There was a prophecy about him. I do now know what precisely caused the effect that you experienced, but I believe the ritual failed, or the Sword rejected your soul, and your soul buried itself into his body.”

“If I kill him, I will destroy myself—but if I let him live, then I shall fear the prophecy for the rest of my days,” Tom says, his voice raw and hoarse. The portrait has stopped glowing; in fact, the explosion of magic seems to have weakened Tom, whose face is now pale and washed out, more clearly that of paint and not of flesh.

“And,” Percy points out, more pragmatically, “He will die anyway, if he is not immortal.”

Tom barks out a rusty laugh, so unlike his normal smooth, cultured tones that Percy flinches at the incongruity of it. Even as a portrait, Tom is the most powerful person in the room. Percy almost cannot bear the occasional reminder that even at the core of it, he is nothing more than a mortal wizard. “I *hate* him,” he says, with feeling.

“Harry?”

“*Him*.” Tom pushes himself to his feet and paces back and forth in the small area that Percy had created for him. “I gave him everything: power, money, knowledge, followers. I built him an empire, and he balanced it on the lives of an infant and a snake.”

“But you do not hate yourself?” Percy asks tentatively.

Tom gives him a derisive glare. “He is not me,” he proclaims. “I am not him. He is a *version* of me, one possible future among many. I reject him, and I hate him, and I will not have him be my final legacy.”

“But what are we going to do?” Percy points out. “Two of six—well, seven—Horcruxes will eventually die; four are destroyed or out of reach; and the last is you.”

“I may be the last but I am not inferior.” Tom laughs again, but this time it is more silky, more confident. Percy relaxes around a tension he had not known he was holding. “I need only a sliver of my soul to come into my inheritance. If I can destroy my soul, who is to say I cannot create more?”

“But—” Percy begins automatically. The idea of *creating* a soul is so entirely absurd that he rejects it without thinking. Magic can neither be created nor destroyed. But what about souls?

“If a soul can be destroyed, a soul can be created.” Tom has the smallest smirk on his face, and Percy realises that this idea is not new. Perhaps Tom has been planning to create more of his soul since the moment he learned that part of it had been destroyed. “I can practise on the snake. I believe I can absorb its soul into mine.”

“That is incredibly dangerous,” Percy feels compelled to point out. “It is an *animal*.” He does not state the obvious: Tom risks making the same mistake that the Dark Lord did, and Percy knows perfectly well how disgusted Tom is at Voldemort’s snake-like visage.

“Given as *he* is liable to murder Potter the second he sees him, we cannot risk the boy,” Tom snaps back.

“Perhaps that is the prophecy,” Percy says thoughtfully, half to himself. Perhaps Voldemort *does* kill Harry, but kills only the portion of his soul. Or perhaps by killing Harry, he kills

himself. What Tom says is true: he *could* leave Harry alive, and therefore ensure his own immortality. He could make Harry a Horcrux of his own, and the two of them would live forever, inextricably linked, tied to each other's fate for all of history.

While Voldemort is alive, Harry will be at risk. While Voldemort is alive, the prophecy remains.

But if Tom chooses to reject the prophecy…

If Tom chooses to protect Harry, to protect him as part of his own soul…

The diadem provoked the diary. The diadem did not realise that the diary was an ally, and instead used the image of Dumbledore to provoke the diary into attempting Fiendfyre.

The diary attacked the diadem, and the diary was destroyed, and the diadem unharmed.

So if Voldemort attacks Harry, perhaps all he will destroy is himself. But what if Tom tries to protect Harry? Would that help, or would that hurt? Maybe the soul that *attacks* is the one that will be destroyed, or maybe the diadem survived over the diary due to the protections embedded in the object itself. Maybe the diadem survived because Percy had been there, and Percy had taken a vow to protect Tom's soul, and Percy had wrenched his hand away, and the diadem had survived.

So if Tom *wants* to protect Harry, perhaps he could protect both Harry and the soul fragment.

So Percy does not *want* Tom to protect Harry, if it is true that Voldemort can destroy his soul but leave Harry alive. But if that premise fails, then perhaps Percy *does* want Tom to protect Harry. Or does he have it backwards? His head throbs. *Between Harry and the Horcrux, the Horcrux is more important*, Percy reminds himself heavily. Harry would agree, or the version of Harry that Percy once knew, not yet twenty years old but burdened with a heavy destiny.

"What do you mean?"

Percy starts and then hastens to carefully explain. Tom knows only until the first few lines of the prophecy. "*But he will have power the Dark Lord knows not,"* he quotes, and then raises his eyebrows meaningfully. "The *Dark Lord knows not*. He does not know he is a Horcrux, but you know."

"We must learn the rest of the prophecy," Tom says forcefully. "Find out who made it, and take me to them."

Percy already knows the rest of the prophecy, the last crucial line: *and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.*

But what does that *mean?*

***

To make a *living thing* a Horcrux…

To *accidentally* make a Horcrux…

To *accidentally make a living thing a Horcrux…*

The thoughts bounce and circle inside Percy's head unrelentingly. He is unbelievably shocked. He is utterly and completely shocked. He'd known that Harry and Tom had a connection; he'd always meant to research it; and of course the boy had odd talents, like Parseltongue, but Percy had never entertained the idea that Harry was a Horcrux.

What he cannot accept is that in his timeline, Harry had been alive.

So either Harry had figured out a way to kill the Horcrux without killing himself—not impossible but improbable, if predicated by the assumption that Harry was the Master of Death—or in his timeline the Dark Lord truly had not been gone.

It takes *days* for him to wrap his mind around it, so busy is he at the Ministry, carefully laying a trap around his colleagues. He writes Pius' speeches and oversees the creation of the new Auror task force and generally keeps his face cold and blank and dangerous, and inside his head he cannot get over the sheer audacity of Dumbledore inadvertently revealing to Severus that Harry Potter, Boy Who Lived, is a *Horcrux.*

(If Harry Potter is a Horcrux, it almost certainly confirms that Tom had not made the sixth Horcrux before his death, which means that Tom likely made it immediately upon returning to life. Seven Horcruxes, then. So perhaps Tom could continue making Horcruxes unimpeded, as long as he had strength of will. Unless the snake *had* been an accident, which could mean the Dark Lord has accidentally created more Horcruxes?)

At the Ministry, Percy says nothing as Pius announces to the gathered employees that the new slogan of the Ministry is *Magic is Might.* He wonders idly who had suggested that the first time; Lucius, probably. He continues to say nothing as Pius unveils the new statue in the atrium and then personally wards each of the Floo gates against unwanted visitors, posing for photographs at each one.

(Bertha. Percy remembers suddenly what Barty Crouch had said, all those years ago, his eyes gleaming with delight. *He needed an innocent*. Had he used Bertha to create a Horcrux, or just killed her when she got caught in the crossfire?)

It takes Percy an embarrassingly long time to work up the courage to see the Dementor again. He tries to console himself by reminding himself that, more likely than not, the Dementor must have fled posthaste after feeding on his gruesome prize. There’s really nothing to be worried about, Percy’s unreliable Patronus notwithstanding, though he can’t help but think to himself that he does not, strictly speaking, know what an unfettered Dementor may do, given the freedom.

(And if several of Percy's nightmares over the last week have had to do with the ragged black cloaks of the Dementors trailing on Umbridge's fleshy body as they linger hungrily over her form, with the thought of his own soul rising up through his throat and hovering in front of his mouth, to be swallowed greedily by a creature of Death…well, he does not think of those after he wakes, panting, to vomit over the side of his bed with a wretched series of noises. Those are nightmares for the night, and by the time dawn warms the white walls of his bedroom, there is only a faint acrid smell remaining to suggest anything was once amiss.)

But work up the courage he does, and to his utter surprise when he pushes open the door to the room just beyond the holding cells—holding his breath and averting his eyes as he rushes past the rows of poor caught Muggleborns, caught in the indecision of where Yaxley and Percy should send them without trial—he sees the Dementor that he recognises, along with the two smaller ones floating just out of reach.

They regard each other silently. Percy cannot make out the specifics of the Dementor's face; its hood reveals only an ominous dark emptiness, and only the slight tilt in the Dementor's head suggest that it recognises Percy too.

Plainly, it will be up to Percy to say something. He takes a moment to search for his courage, hiding beneath the lower half of his spine, and spread it over his shoulders, as if scraping smidgen of jam over a warmed piece of toast. And then he speaks. "I've discovered two more Horcruxes. The last two, Merlin willing."

The Dementor's voice, insofar as it is a voice, echoes evenly in Percy's mind. ***Why have you come to me?***

Percy clenches his toes tightly. "What—what do you mean?"

You fear me now, where you did not before.

Percy flushes, despite himself. Instruments of fear, he supposes, would be well disposed to identifying sources of fear in others, but he had hoped his unease would not be quite so obvious. "It shocked me," he says, a trifle defensively. "To see you feed on Madam Umbridge."

The Dementor does not reply. Something like amusement fills Percy's mind, though it is a cold sort of amusement, and it makes him shiver despite himself. ***I will not apologise for my actions.***

"I'm not asking you to!" Percy exclaims, before pulling himself up short. Perhaps he was expecting an apology, as ridiculous a sentiment as that would be. But why would the Dementor hesitate, when the instrument to its freedom presented itself so neatly in front of it? Is it any different from a cat chasing a mouse?

Or a wizard killing a Muggle, without any choice, Percy reminds himself bitterly. Perhaps he had wanted an apology, but equally so, he can see it would be unfair to ask for it.

"I'm not asking you to," he says again, but more calmly this time. "But to see it occur in front of me did shock me, and I will not apologise to that either. The fear of my own soul being

taken like that is as much in my nature as your actions were in yours."

Now the amusement that Percy can feel in his mind vibrates, as if the Dementor is chuckling. ***Then you may ask what you came here to ask, wizard.***

"Why are you still here?" Percy cannot help but ask, curiously, though of course he has more pressing matters to attend to, namely the two living Horcruxes they must now track down and remove safely. "You are free, aren't you?"

I am free, the Dementor affirms, with a surprisingly graceful bow of its head. ***But the witch's soul was weak and injured, and she was close to her natural time of death. The magic from her death was barely enough to free me from my bonds; it was not sufficient for the others that are bound with me.***

The Dementor's…children, or whatever they are. Percy nods in sudden understanding, though the scholarly part of his mind itches to investigate further. So a soul of varying quality and strength releases different magic upon its death. Did that suggest Tom had a particularly strong soul?

"I will try," Percy says softly, looking at the two younger Dementors as they swoop and soar overhead. "I do not know when, or how, but I will try."

The Dementor's confusion feels to Percy rather like its amusement, like a ripple in Percy's mind. ***Why? I will help you, for what you have told me bears taking action.***

Percy gives a little shrug of his shoulders. "I have done worse things for my own family," he says, scratching awkwardly at the hairs prickling on his neck. "I understand what it is like to feel like you need to protect them."

They manage to move past this conversational quagmire by refocusing on the issue of the two Horcruxes. Percy explains the new problem: that the Dark Lord had embedded slivers of his soul in two living creatures, one of which must continue to live, if possible, when the soul fragment is removed.

I have never heard of such a thing, says the Dementor with ominous anger. Percy chokes past the sound of his mother's sobbing and tries to continue focusing on the Dementor, now hovering further off the ground, the bottom of its robes whirling in an invisible wind. ***To corrupt a living being in such a way…it is an abomination, and it must be removed.***

"Do you think the soul can be removed, without harming the person?" Percy asks anxiously. "He doesn't even know that he's a Horcrux."

Percy stops, suddenly, thinking about this. *Does* Harry know? Surely not. Surely Harry does not know that his own soul is housing part of the Darkest wizard of their time.

But perhaps he suspects?

Then he shakes his head. It is immaterial whether Harry knows or not; Percy cannot imagine that Harry knows how to remove it, save to kill himself, and Percy would really rather that

not happen.

I will find them, these abominations, and I will see them myself, the Dementor intones solemnly, like a vow. Percy nods, feeling awed despite himself. He wonders if Tom ever spoke to a Dementor, though he can't imagine Tom would have ever thought to communicate with a Dark creature like it was an equal. Percy can barely believe it of himself.

Then the Dementor swoops closer to Percy. Percy shivers, both at the increased cold, and at the shock of the Dementor's attention. ***You have not discovered what your own soul contains.***

"Contains?" Percy queries nervously. The Dementor does not respond, merely hovers, silently, in front of Percy, and he continues defensively, "I tried. Everything. Meditations, Potions, magic. I thought I saw something, once…but I'm not sure if I just imagined it."

You were not willing to do what it would take, to free me, says the Dementor, conversationally. Percy flinches and bows his head. He knows his own failings, but to hear the creature say it too is uncomfortably haunting. But then, the Dementor extends a skeletal hand out of its long, tattered robe, the bones flexing and unfurling as it reaches out, palm up, in Percy's field of vision. Laying in the centre of the Dementor's bone-white palm is a dark grey stone. ***But you are young, and you have much still to learn.***

Percy, glancing nervously at the Dementor's hooded face, reaches out and takes the stone. It is small, almost more of a jagged pebble than a stone, and though it looks as if the rough edges ought to be sharp, it is impossibly smooth, like burnished glass. Raising it to his face, he peers at it closely. The inside of the stone looks like very thick fog, or perhaps mist, or dark water sliding over the surface of a moonlight lake. A lake like the one at Hogwarts, perhaps, which Percy had seen one too many times during a late night walk, staring contemplatively at the placid surface until a tentacle slides out of its depths to disturb the reflected moon. Next to the Great Lake were a great number of large evergreen trees, their trunks wide and ancient, their branches spreading leaves over the lake and nearly blocking out the sky…and in the centre of the stone, Percy fancies he can see dozens of small lights, almost like lit windows in a large round tower…

Percy yelps as the Dementor reaches out with one finger and prods his hand sharply. ***It will help you***, it explains as Percy wrenches his attention away from the small figure of Hogwarts that had begun to appear in the stone's gleaming surface. ***It will help you to see what lies beneath.***

Percy burns with curiosity about the stone, but he cannot examine it more thoroughly until he's dispensed of the rest of his workday, renewed the curse on Pius under Yaxley's close supervision, bullied the guard in the holding cells into providing fresh food for the inmates, claiming that he has been ordered to interrogate them in the upcoming days and therefore will need them to be fed and capable of sustained concentration, checked fruitlessly in Moody's old office for any sign of him or Tonks, and choked down a dry, wilted salad nearly to the end of its preservation charm, chosen from the motley selection in his enchanted ice box in his kitchen.

Tom is not present, which works well for Percy's purposes. As is his custom, he sits in bed, after first indulging in a long and steaming hot shower, to wash off the filth of the day. He'd purchased entirely new bedding, and while this one is not quite as comfortable as what he'd used to have, it comforts him, in an obscure sort of way, to know that these sheets do not hold the memory of the last few years of night terrors, nor of Tom.

And then he looks at the stone.

The way that it glitters is rather familiar, not to mention again those strange, jagged edges that pebble smoothly under his finger. If the stone were crimson, he'd believe instantly it was a piece of the Philosopher's Stone, though where that glowed with a strange fiery ember, this one seems to be lit by a bit of captured moonlight. Of course, without the Philosopher's Stone at hand, Percy cannot be precisely sure, but he will have to remember to show Severus when he next receives the chance.

As he'd done earlier, he looks deeply at the stone, and recalls again the Great Lake in Hogwarts, and the beautiful trees he'd been so fond of, at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, and the way smoke curled out of Hagrid's hut, drifting over the large, lazy pumpkins spilling over the ridge of the hill. His nose flares unconsciously as he thinks of his lynx-form nosing through the giant vegetables, and then lightly trotting up the stone stairs and across the outdoor corridor, which he runs across lithely and silently. He skirts the edges of the courtyard in front of the large wooden doors. Above, the clocktower chimes, sonorous and stately, and Percy enters the door, walks past the Great Hall, and goes up and up and up, the staircases moving creakily beneath his feet. And then somehow implausibly he's stepping into the Gryffindor Common Room, his feet taking him automatically to his old dorm, but the entire room is empty.

In fact, Percy suddenly realises that he is standing inside Hogwarts, and nobody is there, except for him.

He reaches out with a trembling hand, but the soft velvet chair in front of him feels real. Except—somewhere in Percy's awareness, he can feel the sheets over his legs, and the stone in his palm, and the faint sound of wind against his window.

"I'm inside my soul, I think," he says out loud, and then laughs with incredulity, almost giddy, as the thought registers itself more firmly in his mind. "*I'm inside my soul*."

But there are differences, Percy notices quickly, bounding with energy from one room to the next. The Common Room is darker than he remembered, the fire burning low, and on the wall opposite to the table where Percy used to study, a large dark slash mars the maroon wallpaper. There are other damages, seemingly arbitrary; a broken down bed in his old bedroom, burned chairs in the Transfiguration classroom, a suit of armour laying in pieces in the corridor, its sword hanging uselessly from one glove, and its gleaming helmet a few steps away.

In fact, the damages look *familiar.*

In fact, Hogwarts looks very much like it had, the night after the Final Battle, when Percy walked alone through the darkened halls, reeling with grief.

When Percy looks up, he is unsurprised to see that he is standing where he'd stood, that fateful day, with a clear line of vision to the patch of stones that had marked Fred's final resting place. There, seared into the wall, is the scar from the curse that ended his brother's life. When Percy looks down, he sees that vines have grown over his feet, anchoring him in place, as sturdy and impenetrable as Percy's own hesitation, all those years ago.

To kill is to damage your soul, Percy thinks, but what does it do to damn another to death?

"I'm trying, Freddie," Percy whispers, looking at the almost brutal way the curse scar melts into the stone. "I haven't been standing still, I promise. I—well, to be honest, I'm not sure if anything that I'm doing has helped very much at all. But I'm *trying*."

Are you? inquires Tom, his voice sounding very much to Percy like he is standing right behind him.

Percy whips himself around to check, but his feet are still anchored to the ground, and so he can only catch a glimpse of a blurred form fading into the shadows.

"Tom?"

(Do you know what your soul contains? The Dementor asks, with something like pity.)

Percy?

"TOM!" Percy wrenches his feet free, kicking away the vines savagely, and takes off at a run. He skids around the corner and dashes down the corridor, his footsteps echoing loudly in the darkened halls, but he can see no sign of Tom, nor hear him, nor sense anything else at all.

He comes to a halt, chest heaving, glancing around nervously.

Maybe he'd imagined it. Of course he'd think of Tom here, confronting where a version of Tom had laid Percy's entire world nearly to ruin. He's imagining it, like he'd imagined it all those other times. And it's been so *long* since Percy has heard Tom's voice in his head. Months, at the very least, if not longer. Or perhaps he's hearing the portrait Tom, out in the other room?

A crinkle of paper answers Percy's frenzied questions, and his heartbeat slows as he looks down and finds himself holding a map. His map, Percy's Map, Myrtle's Map, not the Marauder's Map. There in the corner is the careful rendering Percy had done of Myrtle, where on the Marauder's Map there was a crest of arms with whiskers and horns and the ragged full moon.

Percy's eyes travel over the Map slowly, as his heartbeat seems to thud louder, until all around him all he can hear is the loud, rhythmic pulsing sound of his own anticipation.

Percival Weasley-Prewett

He's alone.

Percy exhales in relief. And maybe...disappointment?

But then he hears a shadow of mocking laughter, and on the opposite side of the Map, another name briefly flickers into being.

Tom Marvolo Riddle

But as Percy watches, Tom's name flashes once and disappears, and Percy is left alone, holding a map of his own imagination, and staring out at the darkened shadows of his own soul.

CULMINATION (2/?)

Chapter Notes

> My god, I am so sorry. I went on a three-day trip to visit some family and came back a month later. Everything is fine, just one of those strange accumulations of events that completely derail an entire month. I'm going to try to post the next chapter very soon.
>
> Thank you to everyone who has continued to leave me such great feedback! I hope you all continue to find this interesting.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: CULMINATION (2/?)

1997 — 1998 (Percy is 21 & 34, Severus is 36, Harry is 17, and Dumbledore no longer lives)

September 1997

The last time they had spoken, Severus had informed Percy crisply, his hair falling between them like a shield, that Percy was not to request his presence unless it was strictly necessary. And indeed, the day after Percy's upsetting incident with Tom, for a few minutes Percy had hovered, quill in hand, over the notebook, searching for the words to explain to Severus through writing what had occurred, so that Severus need not risk it to come to his side.

But in the end all he had written was *I must speak to you.*

And, *Please.*

Severus had taken four Portkeys, Apparated to six cities, placed trails on three unsuspecting Muggles, and still forced Percy to meet him at new Apparation coordinates in the middle of the woods, a forest more northern in England than Percy had ventured alone before. He shivers and pulls his cloak around him tightly. He had not thought that this type of espionage would involve so many furtitive meetings in strange locations.

"The Carrows," Severus says when Percy cautiously questions the lengths that Severus had gone to in order to conceal his true destination. "They've strict instructions to inform the Dark Lord where I am at all times."

"But…" Percy motions at his arm. "I'm a Death Eater."

"You have a lot to learn about controlling your followers if you believe this brand on your arm means that you are not a threat to Him," Severus says sardonically, raising an eyebrow to

encompass the obvious threat they both pose to their Dark Lord. "Why am I here, Weasley?"

"Well—" Percy falters. In this odd and unfamiliar location, the murmur of the trees seems ominous and unfriendly, as if warning him away from divulging his secrets. He begins with the easiest revelation. "Harry is a Horcrux."

Severus' laughter is more like a sigh of regret, melting away into their shadowy surroundings as if it had never existed. "So you've figured it out."

Percy takes a second to register this, and then his mouth drops open in betrayal. "You *knew?"*

"I suspected," Severus corrects smoothly. His voice falls into that awful, formal cadence that Percy hates. "I have suspected for some time. Albus' insistence that the Dark Lord be the one to defeat him merely confirmed my suspicions."

"And you didn't tell me?"

The only thing worse than Severus' condescension is his pity. It slaps wetly against Percy's face and drips into his balled fists. "I was not sure if you would have the strength to do what needs to be done. You care for the boy."

"I—you—so do you!" Percy finally exclaims, tightening his fists unconsciously. "You claim you don't, but you care for him, in some way, at least. And for you to *dare* insinuate I do not have the…the *strength* to follow through—"

"And if the boy must die, by your hands?" Severus interrupts coldly. "If I have died, and you must lead him to his death knowingly?"

Percy struggles around the words erupting in his mouth, so full of outrage and sadness and fear that all that comes out finally is a strangled, "Yes."

Severus cocks his head to look at Percy, his black eyes gleaming in the filtered moonlight. "Good. Is that all you wished to tell me?"

"The snake is a Horcrux too, and Tom intends to use it for his own purposes, to resurrect himself further," Percy spits out savagely. But he's disappointed; Severus' face briefly registers surprise at this news, but it quickly smoothes out and remains unreadable.

"Do you think he will be successful?"

"It's Tom," Percy says with a dispirited shrug. "I suppose he will, if he puts his mind to it."

Severus purses his lips slightly as he considers, both the condescension and the pity evaporating in the cool air as he faces this new problem. "We should let Tom destroy the snake."

Percy bites out, "I'd come to the same conclusion myself."

Severus turns more fully to Percy. Behind him, the trees continue to whisper their warnings, unrelenting and uneasy. "You are angry at me."

Percy spends a second considering denying it. And then he opens his mouth and says, "You should have trusted me, Severus. I have done *nothing* but trust you."

"It was not a matter of trust, you foolish boy," Severus snaps back. "Who can I trust, if not you? I wished to spare you the torment of that knowledge, like Albus wished to spare me."

"Well, thank you, I suppose!" Percy cries out angrily and then falls silent, confused, and unsure how to proceed. The idea of Severus wishing to *spare him torment*—he cannot quite conceptualise it, cannot make that desire fit with his mental model of the cold, unfeeling wizard opposite him. Into the silence, he says softly, "There's one more thing."

With halting words, he explains the whole sordid affair: his soul, and Hogwarts, and Tom, and the diary. Severus listens without interruption, without expression, without even moving at all. Percy's ears begin burning the first time he references his soul, and by the end of his speech he feels his whole face flushed red.

Severus examines the stone in silence, rolling it in his fingers carefully, and using the nail on his left index finger to scrape against the rough-looking edge. He examines Percy too, casting a quick series of spells that produce a dizzying array of lights, too complex for Percy to make out himself. And then he extinguishes the light from his wand and regards Percy once again merely by moonlight.

"The diary was destroyed," he says presently.

Percy feels his flush drop abruptly throughout the rest of his body, which suddenly feels warm and sticky. Of everything he'd expected from Severus—scolding, recriminations, worry—he hasn't truly thought the other man would not believe him, not after the many impossible things they had already encountered together. "But—"

"You and I examined it for months," Severus continues, and Percy is incensed all over again at the glimmer of pity in his otherwise inscrutable eyes. "As did the ghost, and then later Albus himself. Trust me, Percy; if the diary still contained a Horcrux, one of us would have noticed."

"But I heard his voice for months, too. You didn't believe me then either."

"I hear him too, sometimes," Severus admits softly. "And Albus, and her. Those who shape our lives do not truly leave us."

Percy shakes his head, feeling an incredulous laugh bubbling up his throat. "No, Severus. I heard him speak to me. I saw my own soul, and he was there."

"You are tired," says Severus, still with that maddeningly patient pity. "You are overwrought, you are being asked to do things beyond the scope of a normal wizard. I know how it is, Percy. I have been you before."

"No," Percy protests again, willing the other wizard to believe him. "Severus, this is different. You have to trust me."

"Let us assume that you are correct. You are telling me that Tom has access to the Boy Who Lived, and he has not yet possessed him? Particularly if Potter is a Horcrux. Tom would sense that immediately."

Percy shakes his head stubbornly. “But I saw him. I was in my soul, Severus.”

“It is not possible to enter your own soul as you have described.” Severus glances askance at Percy, and Percy flinches away angrily from his disbelief.

“Then what is the stone?” Percy thrusts it toward Severus again, who takes it reluctantly. “What is this?”

Severus examines it again, prodding it with his wand and raising it to his eyes. “It does bear a certain similarity to the Philosopher’s Stone, but that does not allow you to walk through your soul as if it were real. I know that you have studied the soul arts more carefully than most, but the magic that Tom must have used to create the diary is very Dark magic indeed. I believe such magic is beyond even the reach of a Dementor and certainly beyond your reach as well. I am not insulting you, you silly boy,” Severus adds as Percy opens his mouth to protest. “The Horcrux ritual would be beyond my reach as well, and I am grateful for that. Do not allow Tom to play this trick on you, Percy. We cannot have you lose focus.”

After a long second, Percy closes his mouth with a quiet snap.

Perhaps he is going mad.

After all, the Dementor had not said that he ought to be able to walk calmly through his own soul, nor that he should expect to see Tom there. And why had Tom appeared so briefly, only to disappear, and then reappear?

But Percy had been there, in the shadows of his own soul, and he had held the map in his own hands.

"I am not a child," Percy says finally, feeling deflated, as his anger leaks out of him into the frigid air. "And I thank you for trying to protect me, but all I need from you is your trust."

"Percy—"

"I will not contact you again, unless it is necessary," Percy continues heavily. "And I will take an equally obscure route back to my flat."

Perhaps it had not been overly polite to leave Severus there without formally closing their meeting, but it was either Apparate away without ado, or burst into tears, and Percy does not think he could have stomached the latter.

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That evening, he sits cross-legged on his bed, staring at the grey stone in front of him.

In all likelihood, he *is* going mad. Some combination of stress and false optimism, an inflated sense of self-importance, a belief that he and he alone had discovered the impossible, to walk in the interior of his own soul…

If Severus had come to him with such a story, would he have believed it?

Yes, Percy thinks stubbornly. Severus is capable of feats of magic both incredible and incredibly complex. Percy would have asked him for proof, perhaps, or discussed the underlying theory, but he would not have discounted Severus' experience out of hand. To claim that Percy had made the entire thing up, had *manifested* such an odd occurrence out of his own imagination…

No, Percy does not regret what he had said to Severus. Percy had not survived this many years of his second lifetime by doubting what he believed. He had done enough of that in the first timeline. He does not intend to do it for the rest of his life.

And so, clearing his mind, he looks again at the Dementor's stone. It is first cold in his hand and then abruptly warm, nearly sticky this time, like those last few weeks of Hogwarts before the summer truly begins, indolent and lazy and far too hot, the only appropriate recourse to loll by the lake, or practice one's Cooling charms…

A minute later he's slid through the Great Lake and emerged, gasping, at the top of the Astronomy Tower, suddenly far cooler. The second that Percy thinks of the chill, the temperature rights itself, so that Percy cannot feel any weather at all, save a faint, cool breeze.

(Please, whispers Dumbledore, whispers Fred, whispers little Colin Creevey, seventeen years old.)

Percy shakes away his memories and strides confidently to the edge of the Astronomy Tower. He cannot fall to his death here. He can feel that certainty thrum through him. *When I stood on the edge, I felt like I could fly,* says Tom.

Percy fixes that image in his mind and looks out over the twilight blanketing the grounds. With a deep breath, he fills his lungs with cool air and then yells into the ether, "*TOM!"*

And Tom comes.

Slowly, at first, the outlines of his body blurry, nearly insubstantial, like a ghost. For a frozen second, Percy sees Tom struggle to materialise. Then, all of a sudden, Tom's body pulls together, and he's in front of Percy, staring at him with something like shock.

"*Percy*," breathes Tom. He makes a strange, abortive gesture toward Percy, almost as if to strike him, or perhaps to embrace him.

Percy does not move in return. The shock of seeing Tom fills his entire body, as if all of the air inside him had turned to the tiniest of bubbles, as if his blood were fizzing inside his

veins. After so many months of speaking to Tom's painted face, to have him here, gloriously sixteen, stunningly familiar…

Percy has so many things to say, but when his mouth opens, what falls out of it is not what he'd thought to start with, had he been able to formulate a plan. "You did not reply to me, when I tried."

Tom shuts his mouth with an audible click, taking the smallest step backward, as if to increase the distance between him and Percy. His hand flexes, a gesture that by now Percy is intimately familiar with, though on a much smaller hand, and one rendered by hundreds of careful strokes of Percy's brush. "When did you try?"

"Do not try and mislead me," says Percy, and his voice is a strange, even tone that he barely recognises. "You tried to hurt your own soul, and you were weakened. Yet I tried for months to speak to you. Why did you ignore me?"

Tom squeezes his hand into a fist, his knuckles faint. Percy watches the gesture, his shock so extreme that it feels remote, nothing more pressing than an emotion of hunger, thirst, or sleepiness, easily ignored. A second later, Tom wrinkles his forehead, as if it is difficult to recall what Percy had said. "I did not attack my own soul."

"You did," says Percy. "But it matters not. Why did you not respond to me when I tried to wake you?"

"I did try," protests Tom, looking intently at Percy. "Merlin, Percy. I tried for years. I would hear your voice sometimes, as if you were speaking to me. As if you were in the castle with me. And I would respond, so you knew I heard you."

As if you were in the castle with me. Percy flicks a glance around at his surroundings and swallows, rattled. He'd not forgotten that the inside of Tom's soul, at least the diary, had taken on the form of Hogwarts, but he'd been trying not to think about it. "I heard your voice in my head sometimes, but you did not ask for help. You merely replied to my thoughts."

"In truth I thought myself mad," admits Tom. He steps sideways, this time, to Percy's left, so that they are both at the edge of the Tower. Tom surveys the view with an inscrutable expression. "At first I heard you often, and then it was more rare. I thought perhaps it was my own memories. Later I surmised that you were not aware that you were speaking to me, that you responded to me as if I were your own thoughts. And for a prolonged time, I heard nothing at all."

Percy *had* heard Tom's voice more often at the beginning. Percy remembers those first agonising months after he'd finally accepted Tom as dead, hearing the ghost of Tom's laugh, the prickle of his attention on Percy, his sardonic comments. "You heard my thoughts as words?"

Tom shakes his head, his eyes wide and guileless, but the way that he grasps tightly at the railing belies his uncertainty. "Not precisely. I heard them as sentiments, as feelings, as memories. Sometimes I heard a sentence or a word very clearly. It was like an old radio, and your thoughts were only intermittently broadcast to me."

“I heard you as words, quite often,” says Percy coolly. His own instinctive panic at realising that Tom had listened to his private thoughts is mirrored on Tom’s own face, which gives Percy somewhat of a steadying feeling, as if it were his hands grasping the silver bar of the railing so tightly. “Did you ever come here?”

Tom looks around him. “Are we not in the diary?”

At this last, a flood of thoughts threaten to overwhelm Percy: the realisation that Tom cannot discern between his soul and Percy’s, revulsion to the same. Then Percy forcibly tamps down on his emotions and says, with only the barest stutter, “I meant the Astronomy Tower. To think of me, perhaps.”

The expression on Tom’s face is abruptly calculating. Percy watches it, wondering how he’d once thought Tom so inscrutable. Seeing him like this underscores the odd feeling that Percy had been having throughout the entire conversation.

Tom does not loom large, at least not here, trapped inside Percy’s soul. His face, while undeniably handsome, is very much sixteen, and Percy has been looking at an older face in the mirror for many years now. In fact, Percy is taller than Tom is, though his own sixteen year self had been a shade shorter. Yet Percy would not make the mistake of discounting Tom, nor of thinking him weak. As the first Horcrux, undoubtedly he is the most powerful, at least in terms of however the Dementor is capable of assessing soul strength.

But Percy knows Tom. He knows this Tom, like he knows all versions of Tom, and he is not afraid of this Tom, not when the other Toms in Percy’s life are so unpredictable and dangerous and cruel.

I wish this hadn’t happened to you, thinks Percy, not for the first time, watching as Tom runs through his calculations and secrets away all excess emotion, wiping his face clean. “I did think of you,” says Tom, softly, and even though Percy is perfectly aware that Tom is trying to manipulate him, he cannot help but be relieved to hear that he left as much of an impact on Tom as Tom did on him.

(And what does it mean, that their souls are shades of the same place, such that Tom cannot even tell the difference between them? Only that Hogwarts looms large in all of their lives, all of the powerful, unhappy, lonely wizards that find solace in the clean scent of the grounds and the cosy labyrinthe of the castle. Percy wonders what form Harry’s soul would take and thinks that is probably Hogwarts, too.)

Tom continues, “I thought of you often. For a long time I did not know where I was. And then *He* tried to speak to me.”

“The Dark Lord?” Percy asks, startled. He has heard his Tom—his other Tom—snarl out a reference to the Dark Lord with the exact same tortured hatred, but he hadn’t expected it from this Tom.

Tom shakes his head, a sneer curling his lips into ferocity. Lips pursed, eyes away, a look that Percy has now seen on three versions of Tom, always identical. He knows before hearing the words what Tom is going to say. “*Dumbledore.”*

"*Dumbledore* wrote in the diary?"

Tom shudders, a lock of his hair dislodged from its place on his head to curl softly over his forehead. "So clever, Dumbledore," Tom spits out. "Trying to be my friend, to console me. He *apologised* for his role in *setting me on this path*. As if anything I did was because of Dumbledore. All I accomplished was *despite* him."

Despite himself, Percy cannot help but feel a frisson of sympathy for Albus Dumbledore, so close to his own death, trying to make amends at the very end, confronted with the scope of his own mistakes. For certainly Tom was one of Dumbledore's greatest failures. Harry likely was another, as was Draco. Perhaps Percy was a third, though of course Dumbledore would never know. Of course, Dumbledore would have been trying to manipulate Tom, but as Percy is intimately aware, the most effective—and revealing—attempts at manipulation often involve the truth.

"He knew I made more Horcruxes. He said he even destroyed one, though I believe he was lying merely to scare me. He was desperate to know their locations. Him and the boy."

"*Harry* spoke to you?"

Tom scoffs. "Not then. Not yet. Dumbledore guarded me jealously; never let me into his head, never gave me access to anyone that passed through his office. But I could hear the boy's thoughts, more clearly than Dumbledore's. I saw through his eyes, sometimes, though with great difficulty, where Dumbledore blocked me entirely. They were viewing memories of my life, memories Dumbledore had killed to obtain, and yet they were guessing at ghosts." Tom shakes his head and barks out a cruel, angry laugh. "They thought I corrupted the Founders Artefacts, perhaps. As if I would do such a thing, not when I could use them for my own gains!"

So Tom had not planned to use the Founder's Artefacts. Of course he hadn't planned to do so; at sixteen, Tom had no conception that one day he'd walk into a wealthy witch's house and see the Cup of Hufflepuff, so intoxicatingly accessible, so innocuously small. Perhaps he'd tried to use it for its powers and failed to activate them and then judged it useless. Perhaps Tom had no need for unlimited potions, not when he could brew his own, nor a berry that could feed an army. Perhaps Tom had not planned it at all, but acted out of impulse, first murdering the woman, and then calling on the gods to twist her death into something more.

"He thought that by looking at your memories, he would be able to discern the Horcruxes?" Percy asks, when he finds his voice. So that is what Dumbledore had been doing all year, rarely emerging from his office, and refusing to confide in Severus. So he hadn't known the Horcruxes at all. Does that mean that Harry now is clueless, or had Dumbledore's guesses been accurate?

Tom scoffs again, more loudly this time, pushing himself off from the railing and taking a series of animated steps around the tower. "As if I would leave so many clues in my own life," Tom spits out. "As if I would not disguise my movements. And then Dumbledore gave me to the boy, as if I were a parcel to be handed off when he bored of me. The boy did not speak to me for months; he was afraid of me. I could hear his dreams, sometimes. There was another wizard, and the boy was terrified of him, and of me."

Another wizard—Sirius, perhaps? But no, Harry would not be terrified of Sirius, not when he fled Hogwarts to shelter with him. Maybe one of the Death Eaters posted outside Grimmauld to watch Harry? Or perhaps Severus?

“He worked up the courage to write to me, eventually. He’s trying the same approach as Dumbledore—as if I would befriend the *Boy Who Lived.”* Tom scoffs, for the third time, an angry sound in the back of his throat. “I do not know how he defeated me. His magic is weak. He is angry and unfocused. He argues with those little friends of his, and he has a *girlfriend* that he misses.”

Percy feels sick. To have Tom so close to Harry, and all the secrets that Harry knows…it is disastrous. “So what do you plan to do?”

“Now that I know you are still alive, we can continue on with our plan,” says Tom, bestowing a sweet, languid smile that prickles uncomfortably when it lands on Percy. “I can possess the boy, or one of his little friends. We need only a Horcrux, or perhaps we can continue with the ritual we once planned to bring me back to life.”

Percy debates what to say. But with Tom, as always, he can only use his instincts, and hope that they serve him correctly. “Tom, there’s much you do not know. There are only three Horcruxes still active, that I know of; four, counting you.” He ducks away from Tom’s rage and continues, “One is…hidden, and the others are…under the Dark Lord’s protection.”

Tom eyes Percy carefully and then leans forward, his frame flickering in the light. “You must come for me,” he orders Percy crisply. “*Come for me, Percy.”*

“I will,” Percy swears. He looks steadily at Tom, catching and meeting his gaze, and says, “I will find you, Tom. Do nothing rash. The boy—he’s dangerous. We don’t know what he’s capable of, or what powers he may have. There is a prophecy. I only know one line of it: *He shall have power the Dark Lord knows not.* ”

“There is no power I do not know,” says Tom, like all versions of Tom, and Percy, to his surprise, smiles. It has teeth.

“Well, let’s not find out, shall we?” Percy looks sideways at Tom and then admits in the privacy of his own soul, "It was...difficult, for me, to think you gone forever."

Tom smiles, honey-sweet, a smile that Percy has seen on the portrait-Tom's face, though never curling the lipless visage of the Dark Lord. Percy cannot help but wonder where Tom learned that smile, who first bestowed it on him, who made Tom believe that his best weapon is the sticky, silent viscosity of feigned sweetness. Yet underneath this Tom's smile is a tremble of vulnerability that Percy has never seen on the other Tom, and Percy feels his own smile waver at the sight. "For me as well," says Tom gruffly, and despite the clear artifice of the preceding smile, Percy feels abruptly that Tom is telling the truth.

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Strangely, that night, Percy does not have any nightmares. In fact, he sleeps soundly and wakes early, feeling well-rested for the first time in many years.

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October 1997

For all that the Horcruxes are connected, pieces of the same soul, they do not seem to be particularly adept at *sensing* each other. The diary had managed to find the diadem in Hogwarts, but they had been in the same castle, and it had known that there was a Horcrux to find. But it had taken Tom a surprisingly long time to figure out that the snake was the sixth Horcrux, and as far as Percy knows Tom does not know the diary still exists. Certainly the Dark Lord *must* be unaware of the other Horcrux's destruction, otherwise presumably he would be far more cautious about the remaining Horcruxes.

Percy intensifies his research into Horcruxes, still hoping—foolishly, perhaps, but hopeful nevertheless—that he will be able to extract the Horcrux from Harry's soul without harming him. Perhaps Harry can inculcate a similar awareness of his soul and expel the Horcrux, whatever form it may take, from inside him?

Tom is studying Horcruxes, too, and for once, their goals are perfectly aligned. Well, Tom does not care too much about whether he kills Nagini or not, but he has to extract the soul from the vessel if he is to have any hope of strengthening himself. But Tom, too, seems stymied.

As September cools into October, the Dark Lord begins to be preoccupied. Tom reports that he is nearly finished with a lengthy elemental ritual to gather strength, though Tom does not posit an explanation as to why. Percy has a suspicion, of course, and the reason for the Dark Lord's paranoia is far more likely to be the portrait that hangs on Percy's wall than a seventeen year old boy hiding with his godfather, even a boy born of prophecy. Percy had never realised how many *other* goals the Dark Lord had, in the first timeline. He, like most of them, had thought the Dark Lord had spent the entire year focused entirely on finding and defeating Harry. It certainly added to Harry's mythical status, after the war. The Boy Who Lived had been the boy who'd escaped the full attention of the most dangerous wizard of their time.

Yet aside from requiring daily reports from the Death Eaters stationed outside Grimmauld Place that Harry still seems to be locked inside, the Dark Lord very rarely speaks of Harry. He seems far more focused on consolidating and expanding his power, which makes perfect sense to Percy, yet is also rather worrying. The Dark creatures are falling in line, though Voldemort likely knows more than most that their allegiance could change on a heartbeat to the next most powerful ally. The resistance—partially from the Order, partially from foreign leaders afraid of Voldemort's growing power, partially from British wizards unwilling to accept this new reality—is surprisingly persistent and takes up far more of Voldemort's time than Harry. Percy is singled out, asked alongside Yaxley and Lucius to report on these different factions, which brings Percy to the Dark Lord's attention far more often than he'd like.

Percy *had* managed to avoid most of the Death Eater raids thus far by exuding a faint air of insecurity and weakness, such that nobody thought to inform him of them nor expected his willing participation.

But as October rattles through the enchanted windows, the trees outside black and slimy and skeletal, Percy finds it increasingly more difficult to demur. In fact, the next time that the Dark Lord personally attends a raid, Percy is summoned to a place of honour at the Dark Lord's side and in such a way that refusal is not a viable option.

In the foyer of Malfoy Manor, Percy fidgets in his Death Eater robes. He holds his wand in sweaty hands, anxiously reaffixing his mask to his face with layered sticking charms every time he worries it may slip. The other three Death Eaters are concerned with their own methods of preparation; Avery is reviewing his notes on the wards, Gallflower is taking hearty swigs from a pocket flask, and Yaxley—well, Yaxley is watching Percy with a smirk.

At Percy's attention, Yaxley sniggers and makes a show of yanking at his mask, pulling Percy's face uncomfortably.

"Relax, Weasley," Yaxley says dismissively. "You'll be fine."

The four of them freeze as the Dark Lord glides into the room. Yaxley, as the most senior Death Eater, recovers first, sweeping a bow that the others copy hastily.

"Nervous, Percival?" The Dark Lord inquires, gesturing for them to straighten.

Percy forces himself to drop his hands from his mask. "A bit, my Lord. I do not have very much experience with these types of…responsibilities."

"Gryffindors *are* refreshingly honest," comments Voldemort to Yaxley, who laughs obligingly. So the Dark Lord is cheerful today. Percy hopes that means he will be lenient rather than cruel when Percy inevitably does something stupid.

Much to Percy's surprised disgust, the light hearted, jovial air of wizards on an excursion continues into the horrid events of the evening. Avery slices through the wards in front of the modest home with surprising ease, accepting the Dark Lord's praise with a small, pleased smile, barely visible under his mask. They quickly and efficiently surround the house's occupants; an older set of Muggles, a magical child, too young for Hogwarts, and—

Theodora.

Mudblood, foreign-born, Gryffindor, obstinate. Theodora glares defiantly up at the Death Eaters and moves to protect her brother from harm, weaving a surprisingly adept shield charm.

The Dark Lord laughs delightedly. "And what did you receive on your Defence OWL, my dear?"

Theodora grimances at the name but spits out, "An *Outstanding.*"

Percy winces. Better to lie and have the Dark Lord's disdain than his appreciation. At least, that's what Percy has learned in his short tenure as a Death Eater. "And would you be perhaps interested in forsaking your treacherous compatriots to join my followers? There is always room for those skilled at magic."

Avery and Gallflower shift, uncomfortable at this offer being extended to a Mudblood, though Yaxley remains impassive. Percy wonders if the Dark Lord would actually allow Theodora to join, if she agreed. Likely not. It isn't worth upsetting dozens of purebloods for one talented Mudblood. "Get stuffed," says Theodora bravely, and behind her, her mother begins to cry, silent, heaving sobs.

Percy feels paralyzed, as if he'd layered his sticking charms on his feet rather than his mask. He does not know if Theodora recognises him—Percy's hair has always been more auburn, more similar to his mother's, rather than the famed Weasley red—but he certainly recognises her. What's more is that he's abruptly certain that the Dark Lord knows that they were classmates, that they shared seven (*fourteen*) years of classes and Common Rooms. He hadn't spoken too often to Theodora in this timeline, but it is impossible to live in the same tower with someone for such a long time and not know them like a sibling.

Yet Percy cannot do anything. Oh, Merlin blast him, he cannot do anything at all. Even if he does not cast a spell himself, her harm—her family's harm—will be on his hands. Can he shield them, or spirit them away, or plead with the Dark Lord for their lives? Perhaps if the Dark Lord hadn't been there, Percy could have tried to *Obliviate* the other Death Eaters. But Voldemort will not allow himself to be so easily fooled.

"Your parents and brother may go," the Dark Lord says enticingly to Theodora. This is not the first time that Percy witnessed the Dark Lord give this sort of choice to his victims, and it is certainly not the last. The Dark Lord enjoys giving offers of clemency, to test people's willingness to sacrifice themselves for their loved ones, or turn over their loved ones in exchange for their own lives. It seems to fascinate the Dark Lord, what they choose. In fact, as the months progress, it fascinates Percy, too, even as it saddens and horrifies him. "I have heard rumours, you see, of a Muggle army being raised against me."

Theodora clutches at her brother more tightly. "I'm not a Muggle."

The Dark Lord moves in a single step closer, his magic beginning to swell in anticipation. Percy feels sick. Avery, behind him, presses forward, nearly leaning on Percy's shoulder, in an attempt to see the intricacies of the Dark Lord's actions. Percy hates him, hates his eagerness. It feels like at least they should have the decency to look away.

And why is Voldemort *here?* Percy had heard those rumours too; that a group of Muggles, led by Mudbloods, were being inducted into the secrets of the Wizarding World, intending to wipe out all purebloods in revenge. The rumours had never materialised to anything in the last timeline, and Percy hadn't thought it necessary to mention them to Voldemort in this timeline, except for in passing.

But Theodora was his classmate, and Percy had been explicitly ordered to keep the Dark Lord apprised of what his classmates were doing.

Damn you, Theodora, Percy thinks without any real anger as he continues to hopelessly flick his eyes around the room, searching for a way out. Percy had had this thought years ago; that his batch of classmates had been the most affected by the war, most likely to volunteer for something brave and stupid, or most likely to be targeted. Many of them felt they had nothing to lose, without children or spouses, not realising how many people could be used against them if—when—the time came.

"Perhaps Percival would like to do the honours?" Voldemort asks lightly, and Theodora's eyes wide as she realises who must have informed on her, led the Dark Lord to her family.

It wasn't me, Percy howls in his head, even as he moves reluctantly to the front, gripping his wand tightly. But it *was* him, of course. Had the Dark Lord been pleased with him—had Percy ended this weeks ago—had Percy better warned his classmates to run—Voldemort would not be standing here in this quaint Muggle house, personally training his wand on a young Mudblood witch. Oh, dear Merlin, why had she thought her wards could keep out the Dark Lord? Why hadn't she *run*, or at least secreted away her family, if she chose to participate in such dangerous activities?

Everyone has something, or someone, to lose. Percy just wishes that more of them realised it sooner.

(He thinks suddenly of Hermione, after the war, agonising over how to reverse her memory charm on her parents, whether to risk their minds for her own happiness, or leave them painfully oblivious in Australia. She'd asked him for help, and he'd said he'd help her, but they hadn't cracked the countercharm before he'd left. Hermione had understood the costs and moved to save herself, but she'd still lost something, at the end.)

"Do not overdo it," the Dark Lord says quietly in his ear, his breath cool on Percy's neck, his sly voice low and intent. "People cannot think through overwhelming pain; they cannot focus on anything other than their own suffering. It is a delicate balance; we wish merely to provide an adequate incentive for dear Theoroda to tell us what she knows of her own accord. Perhaps the Cruciatus?"

"The C-cruciatus, my Lord?" Percy asks wildly, feeling his heart stuttering madly in his chest. He feels as if Voldemort's hand is on his own, guiding his wand, as if Tom is inside his soul, laughing with anticipation, though his head is stunningly clear of any voices save his own. He cannot blame them for his actions, as much as he'd like to. Is the more honourable thing to die now, or later?

Theodora's parents whimper at the sound of the spell but do not run. Neither do they rush Percy and the Death Eaters. Perhaps they know that any sudden movement will only result in their premature deaths.

"Of course," whispers Voldemort enticingly. His breath, stale and slightly rotten, washes over Percy, who cannot entirely control a shiver. "*He* told me he did not have a chance to teach it to you, but I believe you are the type of wizard to remedy those…gaps in your knowledge yourself."

Percy gulps. So perhaps he is being punished for his intimacy with Tom, not his failure to inform on his friends. It does not really matter, in the end, he thinks. All that matters is that Percy has received the message loud and clear: disappoint or impress the Dark Lord and he will be punished for his failures or his arrogance, however the Dark Lord sees it fit.

"You *traitor*," spits out Theodora, her eyes narrowed with rage. She slashes her wand savagely and Percy parries her curse without a second thought, the shield instinctive erupting from his wand.

"My Lord, if he is unwilling, I would be happy to take over," Avery speaks up unctuously.

But the Dark Lord does not intend for Percy's torture to end so quickly. "In due time. We all must begin somewhere."

Percy's first *Crucio* is weak, so weak that Theodora barely whimpers before it is over. When she recovers, she laughs dismissively and Percy burns with shame and anger and regret. His second *Crucio* is better, fuelled by his hatred of the situation and his resentment at her. Theodora screams, then, a harsh, guttural sound, and lays panting on the floor when Percy is done, a position intimately familiar to Percy. Her parents are sobbing. Her brother is silent, peering at his older sister with wide, staring eyes.

Unlike the Imperius, Percy had not had any specific thoughts when he cast Crucio, save that he was so *angry*, so *upset*, that his mind could not process anything else. He wonders what his spell had produced for her. Knives? Flames? An unspecific, horrible type of agony?

“Better,” says Voldemort finally, when it becomes apparent that Percy is trembling too hard to attempt a third attempt. “Your magical strength is there, Percival. But you seem to lack conviction.”

“I do not enjoy causing pain, my Lord,” Percy admits, his eyes fixated on Theodora as she coughs her way back into feeling. He knows that she will be feeling disoriented, confused, her body understanding it has been only seconds, but her mind having experienced a lifetime of torture. “I find this…” he gestures at Theodora’s tears, “…difficult to bear.”

“You do not enjoy making a mess,” observes Voldemort. “Corbin also dislikes blood, though I would argue that the Cruciatus is quite an efficient and clean spell.” Yaxley stiffens next to Percy but does not deny the Dark Lord’s claim. “You will improve with time.”

Percy forces himself to watch every sickening second of it: Theodora, screaming under Avery’s wand, her parents breaking into wretched sobs, her brother screaming too, having to be restrained by his father so that he does not run at the Death Eaters himself. Percy hates them for their complicity in Theodora’s torture, just as he hates himself. They are all as powerless as children under the Dark Lord’s inviolate command. Percy is so tired of feeling powerless.

Finally, *finally*, Theodora gives up her secret, revealing the location of the next meeting of the Muggle vigilantes. The worst part of it all is that Percy does not believe the Dark Lord truly cares about a small group of angry Muggles. He may dispatch some of his Death Eaters to disrupt the meeting, or he may not remember by the time they return to Malfoy Manor.

But he leaves Theodora alive, which for the Dark Lord is infinitely more valuable than killing her abruptly. Theodora is a recent Hogwarts graduate, young, defiant, and brave—and now broken. Percy can see it all as if Tom had explained it to him personally. Voldemort wants Theodora to live so that she can spread the word to the other idiotic young, defiant, and brave Hogwarts graduates who may be contemplating fighting the new rule in their own way. She will tell them that the Dark Lord offered her clemency, a spot in their ranks, and some of them will believe her. She will tell them that the Dark Lord did not harm her parents, and some of them will judge that worth their secrets. She will tell them that the Dark Lord personally attended her interrogation, so that all of them will fear for their own lives.

And she will tell them that Percy Weasley was there, watching.

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Percy knows that his failure to properly torture Theodora will have negative repercussions. He tells Tom an edited version of the story, admitting to his failure, and Tom suggests, as Tom would, that Percy merely find a few victims to practise on.

“It can be hard, to torture somebody that you know,” Tom says meditatively. “Even if you did not particularly like them. The intimacy is…jarring.”

It *is* intimate to cause someone to pain, to see their eyes swell with tears, their throats working to produce a scream, to see how their body jerks and flails. Percy feels sick to his stomach every time he thinks of Theodora. That night, when he does his nightly sort, he cannot bear to watch the memory again, merely shoving it into a box that contains his deepest regrets.

(It bubbles up in his nightmares, anyway, not properly put to bed like some of the other horrors he had experienced. Percy does not remember the specifics of his dream but he wakes and retches over the side of the bed, trembling, as if it had been his body jerking under the curse, rather than hers.)

The next time that Percy reports to Voldemort, Percy’s failure lingers between them like a tangible cloud of dust. When Voldemort asks Percy, as he often does, about Percy’s youngest brother, the question is more charged than it normally is.

"I have not heard from him, my Lord," Percy replies cautiously.

Voldemort taps one long finger against his lips, as if the idea had suddenly occurred to him. "You have five others, I believe, and a sister at Hogwarts. Might one of them have the answers we seek?"

Percy is practised enough at dissembling by now to allow his panic to float lightly through his brain without allowing it to anchor. "Unlikely, my Lord. Potter was famously close-mouthed about whatever Dumbledore taught him."

"I would think it worth your time to try again," the Dark Lord orders lightly, casually. "It has not escaped my notice that you have not found the Order."

Percy tries not to tense. "They are all in hiding, my Lord. I do not believe there is much of an Order anymore, now that Dumbledore is dead."

“And yet some of our plans continue to be stymied.” Voldemort trails his hand along Nagini’s back, scratching her scales lightly. “To put it bluntly, dear Percival, my use for you is ending," Voldemort says, as if he were merely informing Percy of a minor inconvenience. "You've said it so often: our new world is a meritocracy, is it not? And we do not reward those who do not perform, particularly those who did not wish to wear my Mark."

Percy winces internally. He'd hoped Voldemort had forgotten that Percy had tried to escape being branded with the Mark, but he is quickly learning that Voldemort does not forget anything. "My Lord, I must apologise for my lack of action regarding the Order," he says formally, bowing his head, muscles tensed for the Cruciatus. "I will endeavour to find them. I do believe it is time to pay my family a visit." He pauses and then adds, “I *was* hoping to take over Severus’ brewing duties, my Lord.”

Voldemort glances at him dismissively, though Percy had hoped he’d be pleased with the offer to brew. The look sears. "You have not impressed me, Percival Weasley. It is a shame; I had such high hopes for you, at first."

For a second, Percy can see Tom in Voldemort, can imagine him raking his eyes over Percy dismissively, can feel the sting of his disappointment. It makes his cheeks flush and he ducks his head, embarrassed.

He shouldn't want to impress the Dark Lord—

He *really* shouldn't—

"My Lord, I hear you are looking for a new wand," Percy says, like an idiot, and then internally scolds himself as he immediately regains Voldemort's attention. Yaxley flinches beside him, and Percy cannot blame him.

"Indeed," Voldemort says, softly, dangerously.

"I am curious why such a powerful wizard as you, my Lord, would even need a wand," Percy asks nervously. "My Lord, your ability with wandless magic is well known. I have it on good authority that Potter is a mediocre wizard at best."

Voldemort narrows his eyes, luckily not focusing on Percy’s presumption of his magical powers. "You have seen his magic personally?"

"Oh yes," says Percy, feeling his lower back beginning to sweat. "I observed Potter for his entire time at Hogwarts, not least because he called himself the *Boy Who Lived.* He is an unaccomplished, unmotivated wizard, my Lord. He does not score well in Potions, Transfiguration, or Charms. His alleged skill in Defence Against the Dark Arts is...widely exaggerated, at best."

"Severus does not think very highly of him," Voldemort observes coolly. “But Severus is often ruled by his hatred.”

Percy ducks his head. “I believe Severus’ assessment is correct, my lord. The boy is mediocre in all things.”

Voldemort leans forward. "What is he interested in?"

"Quidditch," says Percy, shaking his head. Voldemort’s grimace looks involuntary, not that Percy can blame him.

"My Lord," interjects Lucius, next to Yaxley, "may I remind you, my son is in Potter's year…"

Voldemort throws him a scathing glance. "Yes, and so are the rest of your insipid little offspring. They have told me nothing of use. Harry Potter and I are tied of prophecy, of ancient, elemental magic. I must understand what claim he has to my power."

"But he's just a boy," Lucius insists, not recognizing the dangerous way that the Dark Lord's eyes gleam briefly red.

"I opened the Chamber of Secrets when I was just a boy," Voldemort hisses. "I killed my first Mudblood, and I used her death to give me unimaginable power, and not a single one of those foolish professors had a single inkling I was anything more than what I wanted them to see. I will not make the mistake of underestimating him. Out, all of you. Now."

At the bark in his tone, the rest of the Death Eaters snap to attention and flee the room. Percy makes to go, but the Dark Lord stops him with a fierce glance. Quickly, the room empties, leaving only Percy and the most dangerous wizard of their time.

"Tell me about him," orders Voldemort abruptly.

"He is...angry, and scared," Percy says, after taking a second to gather his thoughts. "I imagine he believed that he would always have Dumbledore to protect him. He hates Slytherins because when he was introduced to the Wizarding World, he had some negative encounters with some of the Slytherins in his year, and of course Dumbledore went out of his way to make him feel *special* for being a Gryffindor."

Voldemort nods, almost eagerly. "He was raised by Muggles."

"Muggles of the nastiest sort," confirms Percy, nodding. He pauses and then reveals, "His second year, he had bars on his window. They fed him through a flap like he was a common dog."

Voldemort leans forward, his red eyes gleaming eerily in the dark room. "He must hate Muggles, surely."

"I honestly do not think he cares very much about Muggles at all," Percy says honestly. Certainly Harry does not spend any more time in the Muggle world than any other Muggleborn or halfblood. "But I believe Dumbledore has made him feel it would be an insult

to his parents' honour to do anything but follow the Order blindly. Harry feels strongly about honour. He worships Dumbledore."

Voldemort sneers angrily. "He must be an idiot, not to see through Dumbledore's transparent attempts at manipulation."

"He has raw power, I believe," Percy continues. "But it is unrefined. Although Dumbledore manipulated him, he did not mentor him. Harry does not have the type of self motivation to improve himself."

"But there is a prophecy!" Voldemort insists, and his voice is suddenly loud and jarring. "There must be something special about him. It foretold he may grow to defeat me."

Again Percy sees Tom in the way that Voldemort is so clearly disappointed in his adversary. It is an insult to his power to have a rival so unremarkable. "My Lord," Percy begins hesitantly. "My Lord, may I speak freely?"

Voldemort raises a thin eyebrow but merely gives Percy a short nod.

With a glance toward the empty room, as if trying to keep his words obscure, Percy says delicately, "My Lord, you know I spoke often to…Tom. You have seen many of those memories."

Voldemort gives another brusque nod, and Percy hurries to continue.

"He told me of his...upbringing, in...London. He shared memories of the vile...children he encountered in his youth."

Voldemort snaps his gaze to Percy, and Percy nearly loses all of his bravado at the dark rage creeping across the Dark Lord's face like clouds rolling in before a storm. He knows Tom hates knowing that Percy knows his secrets—but he also knows that Tom likes it when Percy speaks honestly, and without ego, and that sometimes on the basis of that honesty they can forge forward.

"I believe the prophecy refers only to what could have been," Percy says in a rush, hoping he can finish his sentence before Voldemort tries to curse him. "My Lord, you and him are not...dissimilar in circumstance. But where you took dominion over your power, Potter let his power languish and wither. He believed Dumbledore's lies, he spurned the gift of magic he was offered, he chose to spend his time at Hogwarts ignoring his studies and focusing on Quidditch. He is a powerful wizard, but power without intention is nothing."

He winces, but to his surprise, he does not feel the sharp prick of a curse. Instead, he looks up to find Voldemort looking thoughtful.

"We could have been the same," Voldemort says, almost to himself. "But he made the wrong decisions."

"He does not seek power," Percy says quietly. "Nor knowledge, nor magic. He is not like you, my Lord. Perhaps he could have been, but he is not. The prophecy speaks only of a child

born who would have the *power* to defeat you—but not necessarily the strength of will, nor the ability. You have power and ability both, my Lord."

Voldemort looks up abruptly and focuses his attention on Percy. "Why did you seek to transform my portrait?" He asks, his voice strangely devoid of malice.

Percy swallows against a dry throat. *Honesty*, he tells himself. "I was lonely," he says almost without thinking, flushing as he realises what he had just admitted to the most brilliant wizard of their time. "I felt alone at Hogwarts; ignored, overlooked. Tom—he was like nobody I'd ever met before. Just writing to him in the diary made everything feel brighter and more real. When I found the diary again after whatever happened with Potter, Tom was very weakened, and I suppose I felt…desperate."

"Desperate," repeats Voldemort, his thin voice flat.

Percy flushes even deeper. "I wanted to do whatever I could to bring you back," he whispers, ashamed of himself, ashamed of how pathetic he is, ashamed of how weak he must sound like to the Dark Lord. "I couldn't imagine a world without you in it."

Voldemort regards him thoughtfully for several long seconds, the expression on his face more human than anything Percy had ever seen before. Then he turns his back on Percy and begins to walk lightly toward his throne. "You may take over Severus' brewing duties," he tosses over his shoulder. "Report back in three days time."

"I—yes, my Lord," Percy says, discomfited. Voldemort settles himself on the throne and then turns back to Percy. Percy swallows as the languid oil of the Dark Lord's magic wraps around him, thrumming in quiet anticipation.

"I need the rest of the prophecy," Voldemort says quietly, dangerously, his magic lapping against the hem of Percy's robes. "Someone in the Order must know it. Go to them. Say what you need to say for them to trust you."

"I can always sacrifice Goyle or Crabbe," Percy says cheekily and with relief. He has the instructions he needs to approach the Order; perhaps he can use that as an excuse to contact Harry, somehow. He is gratified to see Voldemort smirk in response.

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William,

I need your help. You can't tell anyone. I'll be killed if anyone knew I wrote this letter. I will come to you when I can. Be ready.

Percival

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Percy appears obediently at the allotted time to take over some of Severus' brewing. Malfoy Manor has a Potions lab, of course, though the gleaming metal and brass are so pristine that Percy doubts any serious brewing is actually conducted in-house.

"I require Liquid Fire," says Voldemort silkily. Nagini slides sinuously around his legs and hisses menacingly at Percy, who blanches and curls his toes inside his shoes. "Seventeen vials."

Percy tries not to flinch at the request. Liquid Fire is an incredibly dangerous poison—dangerous to brew as well as dangerous to intake. It is also a highly classified potion, which Percy unfortunately knows all too well. The true danger of Liquid Fire is that it will not kill its victims outright, but rather keep them suspended in eternal torment, their throats and stomachs burning as they continuously swallow magical flames, choking on the smoke and searing their tongues. Typically, Dark Wizards use it as an effective torture device, offering small sips of the antidote in exchange for information.

Percy carefully never thinks about who may be imprisoned underneath the polished floors of the Malfoy Manor ballroom, or any of its immaculately decorated parlours. He cannot save them; he cannot hope to even try, so he does not allow himself to wonder whose screams can sometimes be heard echoing off the walls.

This request is a challenge, and he knows it. "Liquid Fire is best brewed in volumes that produce six vials per batch," Percy says, unable to stop himself from adjusting his glasses nervously. "Would it displease my Lord if I decanted eighteen vials?"

The Dark Lord gives him a thin, lipless smile. Another challenge, and one Percy hopes he'd passed. "It would not."

Percy does not ask why the Dark Lord needs eighteen vials of Liquid Fire, nor why he would not require Percy to brew the antidote as well. Instead, he bows his head until he feels the heavy, oppressive magic that surrounds the Dark Lord recede slightly.

And then he sets himself to brewing.

Despite himself—despite the fact that he must exercise extreme caution with each step of the potion, adding ingredients on very precise, irregularly scheduled stirs and monitoring the temperature with intense precision; despite the fact that he knows he may be aiding directly in the deaths or at the very least torture of eighteen other wizards; despite the fact that the Dark Lord could kill him if he errs during the brewing process—Percy finds himself relaxing into the familiar process of moving around a Potions lab.

As he'd once told Hermione, Oliver Wood likely feels about Quidditch the way that he feels about Transfiguration. Transfiguration will always be his first love, perhaps something he'd discovered again later in his life, but a solid and enduring love that is both complex and comforting. But Potions was his second love, something he'd only learned to appreciate after

several years of intense struggle, an art requiring quick wits, a prodigious memory, and an instinctive feel for magic.

Not to mention, after several years of tuition with Severus, Percy feels comfortable in the lab, particularly since he is alone. He finishes the first batch of the Liquid Fire without incident and immediately begins on the second, luxuriating in the feeling of having nothing more pressing on his mind than following an incredibly intricate series of logical steps. He cannot think about Tom, or the Horcruxes, or Ginny, or Harry bloody Potter, not when a single misstep could cause a fatal explosion.

There is only the soft bubbling of the brew, the steady warmth of the cauldron, and the gentle crackle of the fire, all guided by his delicate magic.

It is after midnight when he finishes the final batch, soaked in sweat, but as boneless as if he'd spent the last five hours in a sauna.

"Well done," says a voice, and Percy is actually relaxed enough to look up and grin at the Dark Lord, though he really should know better.

But Voldemort does not curse him for his insolence. Instead, he looks at the eighteen neatly decanted vials, as well as the gleaming workstation that Percy has been slowly setting back to rights.

"Severus has taught you well."

"I doubt he would ever admit to that, my Lord," says Percy, exalting in the feel of *well done*. "He has never paid me a compliment in my knowledge."

To his surprise, Voldemort actually smirks. "Yes, I imagine he would be a harsh instructor. When did you begin your tuition?"

"My third year, my Lord."

"He found you early," Voldemort comments, as if surprised.

Percy hesitates and then dares, "My first Hogsmeade visit, I purchased *Evile Moste Fowle*."

Voldemort barks out a laugh, and once again, though the high tone of his voice is very different from Tom's low timbre, Percy is reminded of Tom. "You *were* precocious. I see why Severus took interest in you. And—the diary?"

"My sixth year, my Lord," says Percy, some of his earlier good mood eradicated by the discomfort of discussing Tom with the Dark Lord. "Lucius gave the diary to my sister, and I noticed it was a very Dark artefact, so I took it from her at the first opportunity."

Perhaps Voldemort has heard this story from Tom—or Percy's earlier comments were sufficient—and so he does not ask Percy to elaborate. Instead he says only, "And what did I teach you?"

Percy swallows roughly, setting down the large brass stirrer he'd been cleaning before Voldemort had entered. "Magic," he says quietly.

Voldemort enters his mind before he can continue, and Percy, unprepared, has to quell his panic roughly as he dives for the right memories in his mind-library and sends them to Voldemort. Tom, teaching Percy the Imperius; Tom, coaxing the entrail-expelling curse out of a disgusted Percy; Tom and Percy in Tom's memories, watching him oversee the progress of the schoolboy Knights of Walpurgis.

When Voldemort exits his mind, Percy tenses, expecting instinctively to be cursed. But all the Dark Lord does is look at him and ask lightly, "And who was the better teacher?"

Percy curls his sweaty fingers around the metal countertop and says, "You, my Lord. Severus expects one to learn by inference, but you always led me to the knowledge I needed and helped me to understand it."

Voldemort smirks again, his lips pulled grotesquely into a facsimile of a human expression. "I shall inform Severus of your critique of his teaching methods."

Percy manages to stop himself from protesting at the last possible second. Instead, grasping for humour as he always does, he only quirks his lips and says, "You may lose yourself a follower, my Lord, but I will gladly sacrifice myself if needed."

"Nobody shall touch you when you are under my protection," Voldemort comments lightly. Percy freezes in place—*is* he under the Dark Lord's protection?—but Voldemort only nods at the vials of Liquid Fire and says, "I shall need the antidotes as well, by tomorrow morning. I trust that should not be an issue for such an accomplished brewer."

Considerably less relaxed than he'd been minutes prior, Percy inclines his head. Whatever version of Tom that still exists in the Dark Lord had briefly appeared, but that knowledge was far more worrisome than it was comforting.

(But, he has to admit quietly to himself, it *was* flattering. Percy has spoken to three versions of Tom, and all of them have that same, intoxicating quality that forces Percy to strive to be a better version of himself, more witty, more talented, more dedicated, more skilled.

But Tom—all versions of him—seem to *like* it, so it can't be wrong, can it?)

At least the brewing keeps him out of the Samhain celebrations scheduled for later that month, which is a bit of a relief. Luckily the Dark Lord had not realised that his instructions would cause Percy to miss the revel, since Percy can't imagine that he'd have allowed Percy such an easy pass, not after the fiasco of last year.

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(Percy reaches for Tom, sometimes, in his mind, or his soul, or something in between the two, hovering at times just before consciousness, or at other times tentatively extending his awareness before he sits down for lunch, or enters a room. Sometimes he feels Tom back, a presence in the back of his mind, or catches a glimpse of his emotions. He speaks to him

twice in October, though Tom seems stressed and busy, pacing up and down in the Astronomy Tower and reporting irritably that Harry Potter has stopped speaking to him and seems *distracted*.

Now that Percy knows what Tom feels like, he is not taken by surprise when Tom reaches for him back. But still, the feeling sends a nervous shudder down his spine, and he practises his mental wards carefully, unwilling to let even the slimmest hint breach his defenses.)

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Just when Percy thinks he cannot possibly do any more, cannot possibly add any more hours to his day, his old partner Mathilda appears and gives him an idea.

Mathilda, he learns, after her fruitless effort to seduce him into giving her the latest suspected locations of several known blood traitors, is not enjoying her *internship* as much as she'd once thought. Mathilda, he also learns, has moved out and is living with her old Hogwarts roommate, who, as luck would have it, was madly in love with a Hufflepuff boy who has been stupid enough to go on *Potterwatch* and inadvertently give away his name.

When Percy releases his grip on her mind, she slumps back in her chair, her dainty frame bound with the same thick ropes that are rapidly becoming Percy's favourite spell, and gives him a scorching glare. "Kill me, if you want," she says contemptuously, sniffing at him. "But he's still a pureblood, just—stupid."

He has to Obliviate her, of course. But he also slips in a scrap piece of parchment into her robes, giving her a location to flee to and the password to a safe house, which hopefully she will discover before the boy is scheduled to die.

And it gives him an idea.

The Dark Lord, for all his terror, does not care too strongly about the particulars of the Ministry. Hadn't Percy been feeling that for months? Budget meetings and requisition forms, scheduled promotions and paid days off, mid-year reviews and performance periods; these are all plebeian concerns, not the types of considerations that Tom Riddle, who had never worked in a bureaucratic environment a day in his life, would ever spend time considering.

As Percy walks through the Ministry, he finds it easy to spy on people, to briefly skim through their minds, and in the midst of the minutiae he occasionally finds gold. One wizard, complaining in an undertone to another wizard about having to pull three all-nighters to finish the latest batch of Wolfsbane to deliver to the Death Eaters, finds to his surprise the next day that he only has twelve vials in his crate, where he was fairly sure he had made sixteen, but he can't really remember what happened after he'd made the finishing touches on the last batch. Maybe they had spoiled, or Gregory had taken them to pad his own output, the bloody cheater.

Kathleen, one of Percy's least favourite witches in the Accounting department, fudges a few numbers without having any memory of it, and a sack of gold appears automatically on an abandoned desk in the lower levels of the Ministry. Percy keeps that in his flat to send to the Order, when he can.

He picks a few Aurors at random and *Imperiouses* them to miss every fourth shot; another group, he orders to hit a partner Auror once a month on accident. He forces a few more to add an extra flick to their Stunning charms, so they are transformed into Silencing charms, on every third attempt. Give their victims an extra chance, and hopefully with enough randomness that nobody would think to accuse them of being cursed.

He picks one thing to do a day. It becomes calming for him, a way to battle his own feelings of incompetency, to remind him that he is making a difference, even in this lonely, corporate battlefield. Sometimes it's simple; he walks past the Muggleborn Registration committee and a breeze ripples by, disturbing the papers, a few silently disappearing in the chaos. Sometimes it's more involved.

But all so insufficient against the destruction and terror that sinks deeper into British society, day by day.

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November 1997

Thicknesse has been proving harder to control, of late; sometimes, in the middle of the day, Percy feels Thicknesse *push* at the mental barrier between them. Percy may have thought it an honour to be tasked with controlling the Minister, but after months of having to obsessively monitor Thicknesse's whereabouts, to review his calendar in advance in order to prepare extra instructions, to know that every failure of judgement reflects on Percy and Percy alone—it is, honestly, draining.

So when Thicknesse chooses to lash out over their mental bond *right* as Percy is sitting down to eat his lunch, in an extremely rare moment of silence, Percy does not think twice before taking a savage bite of his sandwich and storming into Thicknesse's office, still chewing. Roast beef. Not his favourite.

"*What*," Percy demands, lifting the *Imperius* long enough for Thicknesse to come back to himself.

Instead of looking muddled or confused or even scared, like he normally does when Percy allows him a respite from the curse, Thicknesse merely grins at Percy, easily, as if they are in on a joke together.

"His mind is like syrup," Thicknesse says nonsensically, and for a second Percy only gapes at him in surprise. Thicknesse chuckles, the sound low in his throat, and winks at Percy. "Surprise. Do you like it?"

"Tom?" Percy asks, equal parts hesitant and resigned to his fate. He'd known Tom was getting bored, but he hadn't thought him capable of something like this.

"Thicknesse came to see Him yesterday," Tom reveals casually. Percy frowns to himself; he should have noticed Thicknesse's intent. "Well, he came to see Lucius. Apparently he has been *losing time*."

“And you seized your opportunity,” Percy completes dryly. Percy does not know how Tom had managed to possess Pius from his portrait, but he does not doubt Tom capable of such magic. “Tom, if you’d killed the Minister, you realise I would have had to start from scratch, right?”

“True, but I know how much of an idiot you think he is,” Tom points out. Percy winces to himself; perhaps he ought not have complained so often in front of Tom’s portrait. “I figured, if he dies, it’s no great loss to you, and imagine how mortified Lucius would be to explain to Him that the Minister came to see him and simply dropped dead at his feet.”

Despite himself, Percy has to hide a smirk at that. Between Tom and Yaxley, Lucius has been getting quite the beating behind his back.

“And now,” Tom continues grandly, looking around him with interest, “I’m the Minister of Magic, and you can take a break, for a while.”

With a start, Percy snaps right back into panic, which of course is where he should have been from the very beginning. If Tom has the agency to *possess* people—if Tom has the inclination to *possess the Minister of Magic* —then what Percy has been thinking to himself is even more true than ever: they do not have time to waste. Percy had been taking advantage of the Dark Lord’s general inattention to quietly let things slide at the Ministry, such as ending Umbridge’s trials, or instituting strict employee purges. Tom may claim he has no real interest in subjugating the Muggleborn community, but even so Percy does not want to learn what he does want to do.

“What changes will you be making?” Percy asks hesitantly.

Tom gives an insouciant shrug. “Well, once I defeat *him*, I’ll have to decide what to do next,” he says, as if merely choosing a third year elective. “I never considered the Ministry, to be honest, but your conviction that it has value has swayed me to at least investigate what avenues of power may be open to me here.”

“I am honoured to have helped.”

Tom looks over at Percy and smirks, the expression strange on Thicknesse’s small, ratty face. “Oh, don’t be like that, Percy,” he chides. “I shan’t infringe on your space. Merely interested in what I may be missing. You know I have loftier goals than Minister of Magic.”

Percy scowls at the casual condescension before he is able to smooth his face into something more respectful. As always, when faced with the Dark Lord or his more youthful apparition, Percy defaults to the quick, sly humour that seems to be the safest form of response. “Well, it *will* give me a break. Wrangling with Thicknesse was beginning to be a full time job. I’ll happily give you that responsibility, my Lord.”

“I can’t possibly use the same name again,” Tom muses.

“Perhaps you can be a Gaunt. Marvolo Gaunt, risen from the dead.”

“Lord Gaunt,” Tom tries, his expression complex. Percy could guess at the particulars, if he so desired: the delight of being *Lord*, of being tied to a family once so ancient and powerful, warring with Tom’s disdain for the shameful end the Gaunt family eventually reached.

Get used to it, Percy would say to Tom, if he thought Tom would not murder him in cold blood for such a thought. Percy had once thought he could overcome the ignominy of the Weasley name, and then later hoped for absolution with the gilded sheen of *Prewett*. Now he knows he will be judged only for the Dark Mark on his arm and the shadows in his soul.

(Inside him, somewhere, Percy feels the ghost of Tom’s interest. Percy resolutely turns his attention contemplating the enchanted window, rather than the particulars of Tom’s face, until his soul feels like his own again.)

“Do not fret, Percy,” Tom says, interrupting Percy’s thoughts. “I will not bother you often.”

“Your company is never a bother, Tom,” Percy says at once. “May I help you with your goals?”

Tom looks wary and says dismissively, “I have no concrete goals. Merely—ideas, and an interest in magic. I will inform you when said interests materialise into objectives, but I cannot imagine that will be soon.”

The vow, Percy supposes uncharitably, though he inclines his head and expresses all of the right sentiments. Tom cannot have goals, for he is beholden to tell those goals to Percy or Severus. Ideas, though, ideas and theories and wild flights of magic—those can continue, unimpeded, in the privacy of Tom’s mind.

***

The next time Percy peeks into the holding cells, both to note the condition and identities of the Muggleborns captured lately, and to check on the two younger Dementors, he sees that *his* Dementor has returned and is floating in the centre of the room placidly, waiting for his attention.

Percy glances behind him. The posted guard is standing silently at the beginning of the long corridor, his icy brown eyes coolly observing the rows of imprisoned Muggleborns, clearly deaf to their occasional pleas. He has two hours left of his shift, and as Percy watches, he glances down to check his watch optimistically.

“Perform a routine examination on the Mudbloods,” orders Percy, sharpening his voice to the tone he has found most useful with the thuggish Snatchers that Yaxley and Lucius hired for such menial tasks as guarding undesirable prisoners. “I’ve heard rumours that some are planning to escape. Verify their names and identify any that need medical treatment. The Dark Lord will be *very* displeased if any of them prematurely expire before they stand fair trial. We are a just society, as I need not remind you.”

The guard wrinkles his nose, looking displeased at the thought of the hour or so of labour that now lies in front of him, and likely at the idea of needing to closely examine the various Muggleborns. But Percy raises an eyebrow and has the satisfying experience of watching the colour drain quickly from the guard's face. "Yes, sir."

Percy shuts the door behind him and wards it carefully, reflecting as he does so that he can see why Severus inculcated the reputation that he did. It is far easier to be feared than to be liked, particularly if one wants to pursue an agenda of one's own making.

Then he turns eagerly to the Dementor. "You're back!"

Only two nights prior, the Dementor says. ***I have been waiting for you, wizard.***

"Sorry," Percy apologises hastily. He'd have liked to set up some way for the Dementor to communicate with him, but he supposes that is not particularly wise. "How did it go? Did you find the other Horcruxes?"

The Dementor inclines his head slowly. ***One is capable of changing form. I believe you are familiar with it already.***

Percy winces and nods. He opens his mouth to justify his behaviour in allowing Tom to move through the Ministry, but the Dementor continues before Percy can defend himself.

One is a serpent, near to the other: the form you call the Dark Lord. The Dementor pauses and then adds, ***They are the weakest of all.***

"Weakest?" Percy repeats, feeling faint. He thinks of the battle he'd witnessed between Voldemort and Dumbledore, of having Tom in Pius' body experimenting with animals. "I've seen feats of magic from him. The Dark Lord, I mean."

The Dementor jerks its head, a clear sign of irritation that Percy had seen before from it. ***Weakest in soul. They are the most recently created.***

So perhaps they have the *least* bit of Tom's soul, or, as the Dementor alluded to, the weakest parts of it. Percy has to restrain the inevitable thirty questions that he immediately collects in his mind to ask, and instead says, "And any others?"

One in the boy. One in his possession.

Percy nods thoughtfully. One inside Harry, as they'd thought…and then one that Dumbledore gave him, perhaps? The locket?

One with an adult wizard.

Percy frowns, running through the mental count in his head. Diary; Tom, some version of him. Diadem; Tom, whatever form he may be in. Cup, ring; destroyed. The fifth is the locket, presumably with Harry. The sixth is the snake. The seventh, insofar as there is a seventh, is Harry.

"And what were the forms of the last two that you mentioned?"

The one with the wizard is — and Percy watches in some interest as the Dementor mimics the shape of a locket around his neck, clearly lacking the human word for it. ***The one with the boy is a book.***

This corresponds with what Tom had told him. Percy supposes it is a relief to know that Tom had not lied to him.

"Is there any way to destroy the Horcrux inside the boy without harming him?" Percy checks the warding on the door and then pulls out a few scrolls, containing his own notes on the matter. "I think it unlikely Harry will have the command on his magic necessary to visualise his own soul as I've been able to, though perhaps the stone can help him too."

It is not a question of visualising one's own soul, the Dementor says soberly. ***You are not harbouring a sliver of His soul in yours.***

"But why am I connected to Tom like that? I can call him to me." Percy describes their second encounter, how he'd shouted for Tom and Tom had come.

There is a vow that wizards can take, which hides a secret in their soul**,** the Dementor explains. ***I believe your connection to the wizard is similar.***

Percy blinks, not having thought the Fidelius would be similar. "Interesting," he says slowly. It certainly bears further study. "But Harry? That's the name of the boy. When a Dementor, er…attacks a wizard, you often don't…kill him. We call it being Soul-Sucked."

The boy has lived with the soul fragment in his own soul since he was a child, the Dementor explains. ***When we attack a wizard, as you say, we use our magic to separate the part of their soul that controls who the wizard is, releasing their magic into the world for us to use. This will kill a weak wizard, or permanently injure a strong one.***

"But perhaps if Harry can identify *where* Tom is in his soul, separate himself from it…"

This wizard is a companion of yours?

How to describe Harry Potter? By one metric, Percy has barely spoken to Harry. By another metric, Percy has watched the boy grow up twice. He has spent the last decade of his life orbiting around Harry, watching him, guiding him, protecting him from harm, and working for his success. For the last few months, Percy has been reconciling himself to the fact that perhaps his efforts have been instead to ensure Harry's death.

"He is in my care," Percy says finally.

You may take him the stone. But I do not know if it will help him as it has helped you. His soul has sheltered the other for far too long. To speak of one is to speak of the other. I do not believe it possible to separate them.

"What is this stone? Where did you get it from?"

The Dementor's laughter ripples softly through Percy's mind. ***That is not a secret for wizards to know.***

Although, Percy thinks to himself, at least one wizard has found the answer to that question, hadn't he?

***

It is surprisingly easy to find where Nicholas Flamel lives. Enough of his letters have been printed in the Daily Prophet to confirm that his address has seemingly been the same for the last six hundred years.

And, when Percy goes to the address and rings the doorbell, he finds to his surprise that he is actually shown inside.

Nicholas Flamel is not quite what he'd expected. Percy had been expecting either a very young or very old man, but when Flamel strides in, he looks the very picture of middle-aged health. His dark hair is speckled with grey and his face is lined with wrinkles, but he stands tall and firm, and his eyes are clear behind his crescent-moon glasses, so like Dumbledore's that Percy flinches a little at the sight.

"Hello," Flamel greets him, and even his voice is entirely normal, though sonorous and confident. In short, he does not look nearly seven hundred years old, nor does he seem particularly powerful.

But Percy is nevertheless discomfited, though he would be hard-pressed to explain precisely why. "Er, hello."

"And who are you?" Flamel sits and motions for Percy to do the same. They are in a small parlour off the main entrance to Flamel Manor, and to Percy's great surprise it looks more like the sitting room of the Burrow than Malfoy Manor. The flowery wallpaper looks like something his mother would have picked out, and the cups with which they drink tea seem to be normal china. Percy is disappointed; he'd half-expected gold saucers and diamond spoons.

Imagine, having essentially immortality and immense wealth, and drinking tea out of normal china! Some of Percy's old pretension rears its head, and Percy takes a mental photograph to share with Auntie Muriel, whenever it is safe to speak with her again.

"Percy Weasley-Prewett," Percy says politely, inclining his head. "Thank you for meeting me."

"Of course, of course," Flamel says absently, swirling the spoon around his tea with a continuous motion of his finger. "What brings you here, my dear boy?"

Percy starts and sets down his cup. "Of course. I need your assistance."

"I shan't make you any gold, I'm afraid," Flamel interjects, continuing to stir his tea long past the point when Percy is sure his sugar cube has dissolved. "But I am happy to fund enterprising young men like yourself if you have a project in mind. I have plenty of excess capital, as you may expect."

Percy blinks, thrown by the casual offer of funding. He wonders how many wizards go to Nicholas Flamel for money. Had Tom? "Er, no, I am not here for money." *I have your Stone*, he wants to tell Flamel. *I do not need you.*

"Immortality, then?" Flamel looks up and winks at Percy. "I'm afraid I shan't give you that either."

Percy is thrown by Flamel's bluntness, so it takes him a second to get his prepared pitch back on track. "Lord Flamel, as I am sure you are aware, the Dark Lord is causing an incredible amount of damage in our society."

"I'm sorry, my dear boy, but I shan't fight him either." Flamel picks up a scone from the assortment in front of them and bites into it with gusto. Crumbs fly everywhere, and Percy has an immediate image of what Narcissa Malfoy would say if she were sitting in his place.

"He has split his soul," Percy says emphatically, skipping ahead several lines in his drafted speech in a desperate attempt to get Flamel's attention.

Flamel raises both bushy eyebrows and then says thickly through the scone, "Has he really? Merlin's beard."

"He has possessed both myself and my father," Percy says evenly, fighting the urge to Banish the plate of scones away from both of them. "There is another boy who is hosting one of the Dark Lord's Horcruxes. I need your help, Lord Flamel. He is prepared to die if need be, but I am hoping for a way to extract the Dark Lord's soul from his body without causing lasting damage."

"My, what a pickle you all have found yourself in," says Flamel sympathetically, but entirely unhelpfully, brushing the crumbs off his sparkling blue robes. If this was the model for Dumbledore to build himself off of, no wonder Dumbledore was so bloody annoying. "Whatever are you expecting me to do?"

"Why, help, of course!" Percy exclaims, his voice rising despite himself. "Lord Flamel, you are one of the greatest wizards of our time. Of all time. Surely your grasp of soul magic is the most advanced of anyone alive. If anyone could help, it would be you."

Flamel smiles gently at Percy, who wants to throw something at him. "Not quite correct, my dear boy," he says softly. "If I *could* help, it does not mean I *would* help."

Percy sits back in his chair and gapes openly at Flamel. "You–you won't help?"

Flamel shakes his head serenely.

"But it's the *Dark Lord!* He's killing dozens of wizards every day! He *split his soul* to become immortal! You've got to help! You're the only one who can."

Flamel sighs, sets down his tea cup, and laces his thin fingers together, leaning forward to make eye contact with Percy for the first time. "I am nearly seven hundred years old," he says evenly, the hint of a smile playing around his reddened lips. "I have seen many Dark Lords

rise and fall, and many heroes defeat them. I will not involve myself in the affairs of wizards. I would never be able to choose, and I would never know if my choices were correct, so I decided many centuries ago to not choose at all."

Percy cannot help but splutter in indignation. "Choosing to not choose is still a choice," he argues. "You're choosing not to help because–what, you are too lazy or too uncertain to have conviction in your choices? Sometimes you don't know what the right thing to do is, but you've got to do it anyway, or you've chosen to do nothing at all!"

Flamel smiles and leans back. "Perhaps," he says enigmatically.

Percy stands. "A lot of wizards and Muggles are going to die if you do not help us," he pleads. "You've got to do *something*."

"To a well organised mind, death is just the next great adventure," Flamel says contentedly.

Percy scoffs openly. "You're just saying that because you've no fear of dying. You sit here in your...well, not your golden tower, but your *little manor*, and you don't engage with anything around you. What's even the point of immortality if you're just going to waste it on scones and tea!"

Flamel stands as well, but no show of power comes. Instead, Flamel inclines his head and says simply, "I believe the point of immortality is to enjoy my scones and my tea. But perhaps the point of your life is something else entirely. We cannot live other people's lives, my dear boy; only our own."

"I *sent myself back in time* to defeat the Dark Lord," Percy cries out, his chest heaving, quite unable to stop himself from lashing out even if he wanted to. How could the other man just stand there, looking like a completely average wizard, living a completely average life, when he could be something great? "It's been over a decade since I came here, and I'm so close, but I may die at the end of it because you won't help me!"

"It seems as though you have found the point of your life, then," points out Flamel maddeningly. "If you are to die in the course of achieving it, you will have died with purpose. I commend you."

Percy plunges his hand into his robes and thrusts the Dementor's stone at Flamel, like a benediction. "This is the same material as yours, is it not?"

For the first time in the conversation, Flamel's demeanor changes, and Percy begins to feel the warm blaze of the other wizard's magic simmer at their feet. "Where did you get that?"

"Perhaps the same place you retrieved the Philosopher's Stone," says Percy coolly. As he says it, he realises that of course it must be true; Flamel didn't make the stone, as everyone assumed, but must have found it, or been gifted it.

Flamel passes his hand over the stone and it lifts gracefully into the air, vibrating between them, and turning slow circles under the force of Flamel's scrutiny. "It is different," he says slowly, his glasses gleaming with a faint reflection of the stone's misty sheen. "But it is

similar, strikingly so." Then Flamel looks slyly at Percy. "You have seen my Stone in person."

Percy nods. Likely Flamel can tell; he does not want to risk lying to this man, who seems suddenly far less pitiable, and far more dangerous. "At Hogwarts."

"Physical magical theory is oft forgotten, even by scholars," Flamel continues, his attention turning to the stone, still revolving slowly in the air. "Magic of the land, of Arthur's stone, of Merlin's tree, of elder groves and bottomless lakes. We began to use organic materials to channel our magic without wondering why we cannot use stone. But we cannot make a Portkey out of a tree branch, nor a unicorn's horn."

Horcruxes must be made out of magical objects, or objects imbued with magic. Hadn't Percy concluded that, without fully understanding why? "Physical magic has rules," completes Percy, his eyes wide behind his own glasses. "Like in Transfiguration. Resonant properties. Transformative forces."

He can tell by the faint ripple of surprise that passes through Flamel that he'd said something unexpected. But Flamel controls his face a second later and merely says, "Yes. In my time, only mages studied such arts. To tangle yourself in physical magic was akin to playing as gods. Only the great sorcerers could hope to study what you now call Transfiguration, though in my time the field was rather broader."

"Like the Elixir of Gold," says Percy. "I studied it. It's Transfiguration, but also Potions, and Ancient Runes, and Arithmancy too."

"It is magic powered by physical magical properties, regardless of the names we later gave those properties," corrects Flamel wryly. "Toward the end of my investigations, I found that gemstones had properties that lent themselves particularly to Transfiguration. Namely, they enhanced the—what did you call it, the transformative force—and allowed us to turn lead into gold."

"And souls?" Percy asks impatiently, caught up in Flamel's story. "Do gemstones lend themselves to soul magic too?"

The air of academic intimacy between them abruptly shatters, and Percy, feeling the force of Flamel's gaze, plucks the stone from the air and secrets it in his pocket, something warning him that otherwise he may not leave with it. "Do not study soul magic, my boy," Flamel intones heavily. "It offers no prize that is worth the cost enacted."

"Is the Philosopher's Stone a Horcrux?" Percy hazards boldly.

"It does not corrupt the process of death," spits out Flamel, scornfully. "Do not insult me with your macabre hopes."

"But perhaps it corrupts the process of life," guesses Percy, his heart beginning to beat combatively in his chest. "Magic is neither created nor destroyed; it only changes form. When a soul splits at death, it releases the magic inside a wizard's core, and presumably when

a soul is formed at life, it is capable of drawing upon the magic in the universe and binding it to that new life."

"Leave, now, and forget that you ever met me," thunders Flamel, his magic swirling around him like the long burning tongues of a fire licking at Percy's heels. "Do not pursue this line of research, Percival Weasley. It will be the last thing that you ever do."

Percy is not capable of stopping, not when his mind is reeling around everything he'd ever learned about soul magic. "Was it a child? Did you take the magic from a child, and leave it a Squib?"

"I took the magic from my wife," roars Flamel, and in the inferno of his voice, Percy can feel pain. "She was pregnant, and we did not know. I did not know we were binding our souls to the stone, I thought we were augmenting our power."

"Did she die?" Percy asks hesitantly, his earlier adrenaline soaking away.

Flamel suddenly looks every one of his multitude of years. "She lost her magic and our child," he whispers hoarsely. "And now we live without magic, so I do not forget what my ambition stole from her. Go now, Mr. Weasley, and do not return. I will not help you, and I do not have the answers that you seek. Go now, and forget you ever saw that cursed stone, and do no harm with the rest of your life, however you choose to spend it."

I will do no more harm, unless to do nothing is to cause more harm, he thinks to himself bitterly, not meeting Flamel's eyes as he bows and follows the house elf to the front door.

With a pop, he reappears back in his flat, where the only thing that greets him is Hermes' empty cage and a cup of tea that he made two, maybe three days ago.

For a second, Percy stands there, his fists clenched, and his chest heaving with exertion.

Then with a quiet scream, he grabs the cup of tea and hurls it against the wall, not flinching when it shatters and splatters him with cold liquid. He takes two steps forward and throws his chair next, and then reaches for the cupboard and smashes his entire set of plates.

Hope, Percy thinks to himself disgustedly. Bloody useless thing to do.

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Percy is incensed enough by the meeting with Nicholas Flamel to risk showing up to Andromeda Tonks' door and hammering on it angrily. He has an excuse prepared, if anyone were to ask, but nobody ever asks him anything, because nobody cares at all what he does.

And anyway, the Tonks family clearly isn't home. They've all bloody fled the country, the lot of them, which is the sensible thing to do, and in theory he's quite pleased they had the foresight to faff off before the fighting started, but in practise he's so *angry* that everyone has

abandoned him, that everyone keeps refusing to help him, that he has to have *hope* when everyone else is making it so difficult to do just that—

Percy has just whipped out his wand to tear down the wards, if only to give him an outlet for his anger, when the door opens, and he nearly falls inside.

Andromeda Tonks eyes him with one of those looks that clearly all witches learn at some point of their lives. He stops abruptly, his cheeks flushing, and his mouth opening uselessly as she arches her eyebrows and says, “Is there a reason you’re banging on my door, then?”

Percy brushes the wrinkles out of his robes and straightens, striving for something approaching dignity. “I thought you’d left the country.”

“That was the idea of the disguise,” Andromeda says dryly, flicking her wand at the door that swung shut behind Percy. The door glows blue, and she nods contently at it, and then leads Percy into the dining room, where the other two Tonks’ have clearly just finished having their supper.

“Disguise,” says Percy weakly. "I see. Well, it was an effective one."

"I trust you were not followed?" Andromeda says wryly, walking back to take her seat. Percy hovers awkwardly in the doorway; he would not risk seating himself, uninvited, in front of a lady like Andromeda. Before Percy can respond, she catches Tonks' eye and says, with a slimmer of humour, "Although it would be a good teddy of the wards, no?"

"Mother," says Tonks, with dignity, "what in Merlin's name are you doing?"

"My love," tries Ted next, sending Percy a small, apologetic glance. "You've just invited a Death Eater into our home."

"Not exactly," say Andromeda and Percy, together. She waves him on with an imperious gesture, holding her silver fork delicately. Percy clears his throat and continues. "Well, I've not been invited into your home," he awkwardly explains. "I've not been asked to sit, nor to hang my coat, nor offered any sustenance."

"Hungry, are you?" snaps Tonks. "Killing Dumbledore was too much for an empty stomach? I notice you didn't deny the charge of Death Eater."

Only after do they sort out the particulars, a glint of humour glimmering in Andromeda's eyes as she allows her daughter and Percy to stumble their way toward the truth, is Percy asked to sit at the table. He takes a roll from the platter and bites into it pointedly; he would be a poor pureblood if he harmed them, after sharing their bread.

"I don't understand," says Tonks, her hair not still amber, but not that dull, listless black, either. "If Dumbledore was dying, why not tell us he'd ordered Snape to do it?"

"Your hatred is saving Severus' life," says Andromeda sharply. "The Dark Lord will be watching him—and *you*—very closely.”

Percy nods at her searing look, understanding the unspoken message. Percy is in as much danger as Severus, if not more, for he shares the other man's secrets, but does not have the trust afforded by his reputation. "I need to find Harry," Percy says bluntly, catching and holding Tonks' eyes. "I don't think you lot ought to be left out of the truth, not if you have the required subtlety to continue to openly despise Severus in public. I have news that I must give to Harry, and *only* Harry; I can't risk it getting out," he says forcefully as Tonks opens her mouth to offer to act as the go-between. "I've learned something very shocking about the prophecy, and the Dark Lord, for now, is unaware of it. Dumbledore's portrait is not being particularly forthcoming with Severus, but we believe it is likely even he did not know this secret."

Andromeda narrows her eyes at Percy, and he gives her the tiniest nod back. It is a secret concerned with the Horcruxes; that should be enough to win her support, though Percy does not think he should even tell Andromeda what he'd learned, unless it becomes necessary.

Ted Tonks speaks up for the first time, his voice low and uncomfortable, perhaps remembering the vow he'd helped his wife and Percy swear together. "Is this secret dangerous for Harry to know?"

Percy gives this its due consideration, out of respect for the other wizard, who had always struck Percy as genuine and kind. Harry will need to know that he is a Horcrux, at some point; Percy thinks with a shudder of the knowledge that Tom may be crawling in his own soul, somewhere, though he has to remind himself repeatedly that Severus does not believe he is anything close to an actual *Horcrux*, and instead suffering the after-effects of prolonged possession and contact. It may be safer for Harry to not know, but at the same time, Percy cannot send him blindly to his death without telling him *why* it may be so crucial for him to give up his life.

"It will be dangerous," Percy concedes. He looks up and meets Ted's guileless eyes. "But it will be dangerous for him not to know, either. I cannot say which course is the safest for Harry, but this is a secret about his life, and I think he deserves to know."

Unfortunately, Tonks informs him a few minutes later that she cannot get into Number 12 Grimmauld Place, nor can Andromeda. "Neither could Remus, as far as I know," she adds, her nostrils flaring. "He was *very* upset that Sirius boxed him out of whatever he was planning. Spent a few days mumbling about the bloody Marauders, and Sirius not trusting him *again*, and then went on a fool's errand to the lower werewolf camps in some misguided effort to prove his trustworthiness."

Percy winces. He again glances at Andromeda, who gives him the barest grimace in return. So Remus Lupin had broken up with Tonks, in the midst of a war, because he felt left out of his old schoolmate's plan. He feels abruptly sorry for Tonks, who scowls at the pity that crosses his face, unbidden.

"Yes, he's a bloody idiot, and yes, I'm upset at him," growls Tonks, tearing apart a roll with more force than is, strictly speaking, necessary, though the rolls *are* rather more dense than the light, buttery ones that Percy occasionally indulged in at Hogwarts. "He's sworn off all communication with the outside world unless he has *something to report*. I think he's alive, but I can't be certain, which I'm sure is half the point to him."

“I’ll try to see if he’s alive.” He can probably swing it; the Dark Lord knows of his interest with the werewolves, after all the diligent and careful work that Percy had completed for Barty Crouch, Jr. Percy won’t ask for Lupin specifically, but if he *is* dead, it shouldn’t be too hard to discover. “If it makes you feel better, the Dark Lord isn’t actively pursuing any of the werewolf clans; he’s waiting for them to come to him. So if Remus keeps his head down, he should be safe.”

“If,” scoffs Tonks with an expressive eye-roll. Her pursed lips tremble, and Percy speaks quickly to forestall any tears. He does not have any experience with a teary Tonks; he’s used to the Tonks who is more liable to punch him in the arm than break into sobs, and he’s not sure he would know what to do with the latter if it arrived without warning.

“I also don’t have any way to communicate with McGonagall anymore, since we were using Headquarters to pass messages.”

Tonks drags her hand roughly across her eyes but then, with a shadow of her characteristic humour, transforms her face to that of the witch with the bob that she used to adopt to meet with Percy at bars unobtrusively. “Leave that to me.”

“I have money, too. Some of it.”

“Good,” Andromeda says crisply. “With the goblins working for *Him,* we’ve run out of funds, even with those supplied by you to McGonagall last year. I shan’t ask where you’re getting quite so much gold from, but we need it desperately. It is an expensive business to save lives, I’m learning.”

It does improve Percy’s mood to have made up with Tonks, though while Ted Tonks’ face is plastered over posters with known Muggleborns listed, the Tonks family is unlikely to leave the safety of their disguised house. They’re lucky, at least; Percy sees far too many of his former classmates and their parents blinking out at him from the posters that paper the walls in Diagon Alley and hears their names spoken by jocular Snatchers bragging about their latest conquests.

Lucius’ capable work with the Snatchers in conjunction with the tightening vice of the Dark Lord’s taboo means that Muggleborns fill the holding cells, waiting to be judged and disposed of as the Ministry sees fit. The Dark Lord is pleased, which Lucius takes to mean that he has redeemed himself for his mistakes, and his son’s. It is not uncommon to see his shining blond head in the Ministry, overseeing the security precautions, conducting surprise checks on the departments, and speaking confidentially to Nott, hired to head the Aurors in Moody’s absence, a nasty wizard who seems to delight in rooting out *undesirable connections* to otherwise blameworthy purebloods. Several of Percy’s past classmates are forced to give up the locations of their known friends, to lead the Aurors straight to their doors, to disclose how many siblings they have or where their parents work or what cities they may have fled to in the night.

Percy obediently lists his associations when Nott comes knocking at his door. What he knows, and what his peers do not, is that Nott has this information anyway; Umbridge had managed to copy details from the Hogwarts registry, somehow, and spawned a squad of

punctilious, pretentious wizards who delighted in ensuring said details were correct. Nott is not searching for undesirables; he is looking for collaborators. Traitors.

But his classmates must believe that every slip of their tongue, every scared revelation, every betrayal of the witches and wizards that they breakfasted with, studied with, argued with, and learned with, must result in one of those holding cells gaining a new occupant.

It must be agonising. It is agonising for Percy to see the expression on someone's face after Nott leaves their office in triumph, the dark circles under their eyes, their sunken cheeks, the way that their mouths open and shut silently, how many of them grasp weakly at the air in Nott's wake, as if to take back their words by force.

I am trying, Percy tells them silently, though he only raises a contemptuous eyebrow to remind them to adopt the blank mask that is the safest adornment in these new, volatile times. He passes all the information he can to Tonks, when she drops by at his desk or intersects his walk home, sometimes dressed as a Muggle woman crossing the street, or a foreign wizard looking for the Minister, or an elderly man carrying a novel to the park. But by necessity, Percy cannot know whether his information proves useful; he can only look for scraps of hope in the gossip between the Death Eaters and the reports laid at the feet of the Dark Lord and the memos circulating in the Ministry. It is a laborious task, to piece together the flow of the war from the outskirts of all of these small tidbits of information, and more often than not Percy is depressed by how useless it all seems, how many people are killed and captured and tortured and subjugated.

The one small light that burns in the back of Percy's mind is that many of these Muggleborns are not outright killed, now that Yaxley, to his disgust, has been given Umbridge's own position, which is obviously a form of punishment, and one he finds humiliating.

(Percy offered to help with the work immediately upon hearing the news; he isn't sure why Voldemort didn't demote him, but he does feel a bit of guilt that Yaxley should suffer all the punishment for what is technically their shared mistake. Not to mention now he can slip in as many errors as possible to the lists that are mass printed each fortnight, as well as send copies to McGonagall).

"I don't understand what all the fuss is about," growls Yaxley, the next time that he and Percy are alone. Percy hums sympathetically; Lucius has begun to oilily question Yaxley as to why the Mudblood trials have been indefinitely stalled, often asking just out of earshot of the Dark Lord, which makes Yaxley twitchy and upset. Yaxley had taken the expedient step of declaring all possible Mudbloods guilty until proven innocent, which certainly filled the cells in Azkaban but kept trial-related expenses low. Percy feels quite bad for all the Muggleborns languishing in Azkaban, but they're better off miserable than dead, which was certainly the direction that Umbridge was taking the department. Yaxley is perfectly aware that he may be capturing a half-blood along with the filth, and so confided in Percy that he felt an accidental murder or two would cause more outrage than some mistaken convictions. "The ruddy trials are a waste of time. *And* they're expensive. It's like you say; we've still a bloody Ministry to run, which takes money."

Percy nods sagely. As the months slip into winter, the wheels of bureaucracy continue. The budget committee is hesitantly having biweekly meetings in advance of year end. He's seen

the preliminary reports; they'll have to make some cuts if they want to continue with some of the more resource intensive activities, like rewarding Snatchers for their ill-gotten gains.

"And I dunno where *he* gets off, walking around the Ministry like *he* was the one to set it up as the Dark Lord wanted," Yaxley continues to gripe. A curious side effect of the pair lying to the Dark Lord is that Yaxley seems to trust Percy, at least with these petty grievances. They give Percy a sense of normalcy in what are, without question, awful and turbulent times. Percy has listened patiently to Fudge, Crouch, Umbridge, and Scrimgeour complain about any number of things. Yaxley is merely the next. "We were the ones who did the *real* work."

Percy continues to nod. Yaxley needs very little encouragement.

"It was *his* bloody son that failed to kill Dumbledore, anyway," Yaxley says huffily. "And Snape's off at Hogwarts, the lucky bastard. What does he have to do? Oversee detentions? We're doing the real work, Weasley, you and me."

It is true that the Ministry's descent into the Dark Lord's control is likely having more effect on the average wizard than the Snatchers, or the new curriculum at Hogwarts. Even having lived through it the first time, Percy had not fully realised how much control the Ministry has over everyone's lives. There is a department to approve permits for construction, so that if somebody wishes to build a house or business, or enchant it legally with protections, they must get it first approved, which means that the Ministry has a fairly accurate list of where people's primary residences are, and a rough approximation of their protections.

Every business in any of the legal alleys (and even some in Knockturn Alley, to Percy's surprise) pay taxes, update their registration, and apply for licences when they must. It is easy for the Ministry to revoke said licences to any undesirables, particularly when the Ministry can flex the force of the Aurors to their will.

The hospital is largely funded by a Ministry foundation as well, which means that the Ministry can order the Healers not to treat said undesirables, and the Board of Supervisors of St. Mungo's must agree if they wish to keep themselves operational.

Transportation is equally limited; Floos on the Floo Network are individually recertified (which makes Percy, despite himself, regret helping the Edgecombe girl with her spots), providing Ministry employees an opportunity to investigate the particulars of each home, as well as observe where and when people are travelling. Portkeys have always been licensed but they become nearly impossible to justify, save for legitimate business reasons, and only the very secure seventeen-year-olds show up for their Apparition exam after their birthdays. The Trace stymies the Ministry, luckily enough; it is an ancient spell that tracks underage magic in Muggle residences, and even Lucius cannot figure out how to modify it to track Muggleborn magic instead. (Percy has a theory it is also linked to the Hogwarts registry as its anchor, or that one could create a new Trace, anchored to the existing Trace, but says nothing.)

And for all of Gringotts' alleged independence and separation from the Ministry, the goblins are far more cooperative with the Dark Lord than they ever were the Minister.

Shopping, employment, housing, transportation, money…

It is no *wonder* that so many purebloods and half bloods decide early on that resistance is futile. There are many ways to threaten someone, even if their lives are not directly at stake. As the months continue, Percy becomes intimately familiar with all of them.

(And all the time, Tom smiles at him with Pius' teeth, and his presence echoes in Percy's head, not particular thoughts, but the impressions of them, like an echo left behind, still stubbornly making its way through time, growing quieter and quieter with each second.

Hearing from Tom worries him. Silence worries him even more.)

CULMINATION (3/?)

Chapter Notes

> Almost to the end, now. A lot on Percy's plate. As usual, please leave me your comments/feedback and please point out any errors! I have written a good chunk of these last few chapters on the plane and on the bus, so I'm sure some errors snuck in despite my best efforts otherwise.
>
> Happy Halloween!

CHAPTER ELEVEN: CULMINATION (3/?)

1997 — 1998 (Percy is 21 & 34, Severus is 36, Harry is 17, and Dumbledore no longer lives)

November 1997

For all that Percy's life has changed indelibly over the last year; for all that he has a Mark on his arm, and he's controlling the Minister of Magic, and the freedom of travel has been revoked, and he reports to the most evil wizard of their time; for all that he has, by many accounts, failed miserably at his arrogant, initial task, and is now playing at damage control; by the time that November slithers around the corner, Percy has become somewhat reconciled to cadence of his days.

Harry is—well, not *safe,* but ensconced in the Black family manor with Percy's brother, the Smartest Witch of Her Age, and Harry's godfather, heir to the Black name. Ginny is at school, and Severus wouldn't let anything happen to her. Bill is protected by a Fidelius charm with Auntie Muriel, Charlie's out of the country, and the twins are in hiding and hopefully will stay *put.* Landon is in France, and Sonali in India.

So while Percy is not *relaxed*—certainly it is impossible for him to ignore the harsh realities of their situation, given that he must go to Malfoy Manor weekly, and every Thursday afternoon he must examine the Mudbloods that have been captured and decide whether to interrogate them or send them straight to the Ministry—he at least feels he has something like a handle on the situation. Certainly being able to speak to Tonks, even infrequently, has assuaged some of the guilt in Percy's heart.

But he's worried about Tom. Tom disappears from his portrait for long stretches at a time, and Percy does not want him to speak to the Dark Lord more than is necessary. As long as Tom resents the Dark Lord but is hesitant to incite his anger, Percy can sleep restfully, or as restfully as he can, given everything else that worries him. But even Tom begins to feel

distant, removed, as the days pass and Percy becomes entrenched in his routine and the ordered chaos of the Ministry. In truth, Percy has on more than one account entirely *forgotten* about Tom, sitting in his portrait, flat and unaging and unalterable.

(Sometimes Percy forgets about the other Tom too, even though he can now identify the strange wisps of emotion that float into Percy's mind as the Horcrux reacting to whatever he sees through Harry's eyes.)

This is how you exist in war, Percy thinks to himself sometimes. He's learned how to cut the line at the cafeteria by raising a single, imperious eyebrow, or better yet, send Julian, the new Percy, or Matthew, the new Mathilda, to fetch him lunch. He's learned to shield himself nearly continuously, to keep his mental guards up at all times, to smooth his face into a cool, emotionless façade. He's learned which Ministry checkpoints are the least crowded, and which guards are frightened enough of him to wave him through after only a perfunctory glimpse at his arm, and which employees are hiding their undesirable pasts, and which Snatchers can be paid off to deliver their bounty to Yaxley's office directly, where the other man skims some of the reward money for himself and then tosses the captives into the cells without identifying them until Percy's weekly rounds.

And they've all learned; the assistants and the Department Heads, struggling to acclimate to their new jobs. The guards posted at every entrance and exit, the people who now have jobs that never existed before, like feeding prisoners *en masse* or disposing of their dangerous personal affects, like creating propaganda posters that strike just the right balance of fear-mongering but reassuring, the housewives that learn the patrol schedule in Diagon Alley so that they may do their shopping unobserved, the shopkeepers that know when to report a suspicious character and when to turn a blind eye, the delivery people that sort through the chaotic issues of supply and demand ignored completely by those in power and manage to keep food on the shelves and robes in stock and ingredients under preservation charms.

They've all learned, and so the days pass, and the Dark Lord needs to do very little to maintain his grasp on society.

Of course, just when Percy has this idiotic thought that he can learn to live with this, and hopefully will have enough stability that he can return to the task of figuring out how to contact Harry and have him destroy the locket, Tom intervenes.

"The Dark Lord is pleased with you," Tom reports back to Percy, lounging in his portrait like someone may sink into an armchair after a hard day's work.

Percy pauses in the middle of syphoning blood out of his clothes—an extremely delicate manoeuvre, if one wants to preserve the structural integrity of the silk—and gives him a look. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, he's been impressed with your brewing, though significantly less pleased with your lack of progress regarding finding him the prophecy. In fact, it has occurred to Him that you may be trying to spy on him for your family," Tom says with an ironic laugh. "But I convinced him you were properly loyal to the cause and more capable than many of those idiots, despite your inability to properly torture someone."

"And how did you do that?" Percy asks tiredly.

Tom grins up at him, and the flash of his teeth suddenly reminds Percy of *his* Tom*,* of the sixteen year old boy Tom had once been, and he swallows roughly against a sudden urge to cry. The last time that Percy spoke to Tom in his mind, Tom had looked agitated as the winds of Hogwarts whipped through his dark hair, but he had looked suspiciously at Percy and refused to reveal what had him so worried. "Oughtn't you ask why?"

Percy raises an eyebrow, irritated all over again at both Toms for their turbulent, mercurial emotions that rule Percy's ever waking second. Tom frowns petulantly, as if Percy had robbed him of a pleasure, but then says, "Because we are partners, of course."

"I wasn't aware Dark Lords had partners."

"Well, luckily for you I shan't be a Dark Lord," Tom snaps, and his voice is suddenly cool. Percy flinches from reflex and Tom continues, tone marginally warmer, "*His* mistake was believing he could rule from fear and fear alone."

"And what will you rule from, then?"

"Power," says Tom with studied casualness. "Knowledge. They will fear me, but they will fear my might, and respect my abilities, and long for my acclaim. Nothing will escape my notice."

Percy ducks his head and returns to his robes.

“We need to get the snake,” Tom says, curling his tongue around the word *we*. Percy looks up again at this. Tom never says her name, never says *Nagini*. Always *the snake*, and always in the same contemptuous tone.

“I thought you could not get to the snake,” Percy points out, acerbically. Percy is doing all that he can; he does not need yet another master overseeing his work and deeming it inadequate.

Tom gives him a lazy smile. “Your father’s life force only does so much. I fear it may be time to...release him.” Percy does not say anything, but his entire body tenses, and he cannot control the anger that crosses over his face like a shadow. Tom’s laugh, bright and airy, is a jarring contrast to Percy’s mood. “Relax, Percy. I will not kill him, though his continued existence does make you regrettably weak. Nevertheless, I imagine you ought to take the day off tomorrow. I can’t be certain that your father will—take his release safely.”

Percy licks suddenly dry lips. On one hand, he is not blind to what Tom is doing: distract Percy with Arthur’s life, so that Percy cannot interfere in his experiment with Nagini. On the other hand, Percy cannot so coolly walk away from his father, not *really*, and Tom bloody well knows it. “Tom—”

Tom raises an eyebrow at him. “Percy?”

Percy cannot stop Tom from experimenting on Nagini. Tom spends half of his time in Parkinson Manor, usually as Bullstrode, and the other half of his time as the bloody Minister of Magic. No, if Tom wants to get at Nagini, there is nothing Percy can do save destroy the portrait then and there. And, of course, the only reason that Percy still has to avoid destroying the portrait is Tom's hold on Arthur. Tom must know that. Tom could only be willing to release his hold on Arthur if he is confident enough in whatever power Nagini will provide him to assume a challenge from Percy would later be impossible.

But they have the portrait, do they not? As long as Percy has the original portrait, he has some hold over Tom. He'll have to make sure that Tom does not remember to take the portrait with him.

It will be essential in the coming months that Tom has no reason to doubt Percy. So instead of saying any of the dozens of other things that Percy is thinking, he merely leans forward and looks intently at Tom. "Be *careful*," Percy breathes, widening his eyes, and allowing all of the affection that he has for Tom—despite himself—colour his tone. "The snake is a Horcrux too, and while you are undoubtedly the stronger Horcrux, we do not know what protections *he* used on the snake. Do not be hasty, Tom. I—I could not bear it if you left me, this close to the end."

Percy is not even lying. With practised ease, he does not bother to think too closely about why that last sentence was true. To his surprise, Tom regards him with a silent look, too inscrutable on his painted face for Percy to make out, but clearly meaningful nevertheless.

"I will be careful," Tom promises. He hesitates and then says, "Your father will suffer tomorrow, but he should not die, if you are very careful."

Percy swallows and nods tightly.

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Tom is going after Nagini tomorrow. He's going to release my father.

Tomorrow?

Yes.

I believe your parents are back at the Burrow. Minerva helped them to ward it with William.

I am frightened, Severus. Percy does not even feel embarrassed at admitting it. He hesitates, wandlessly evaporating the drips of ink that threaten to mar the notebook. *I fear this will make Tom too strong.*

I fear we will not be sure whether the Horcrux is fully extracted from the snake, Severus writes back. Percy cannot even afford to be shocked that Severus admitted to being nervous; rather, the thought fills him with dread.

I spoke to a Dementor.

*You **spoke** to it?*

It has been helping us. The diary is still active. Harry has it. I believe Sirius has the locket still.

Severus does not respond for several seconds. Severus' reply, when it comes, is darkly written, as if the man is pressing firmly into his own notebook with his quill. *We have to move with intention. Do you know where Potter is?*

Percy thinks of Tom. One of them. *Presumably at Headquarters. But if he leaves, I believe I can find him.*

For all of McGonagall's—and Bill's—protections, Percy does not find it particularly difficult to break past the wards on the Burrow. Perhaps because they recognize his blood. Percy does not know whether he should be annoyed at them for allowing Weasleys to enter the threshold, an obvious security flaw, or pleased that neither of them truly believe him to be evil.

Regardless, his mother has him at wandpoint within minutes of his entering through the backdoor into the kitchen. Percy raises his hands instinctively, his wand flat against his palm and tucked behind his thumb, as his mother whirls on him in a fury. The door bangs loudly behind him.

"Percy," Molly says evenly, flicking her glance to the old family clock. Percy looks at it, too; his spoon turns slowly over to *Home* before springing back to *Mortal Danger*, joining the rest of the family.

Not a very useful clock, that. Percy wonders, not for the first time, how it's meant to even work. His father had enchanted it before Percy had been born.

"Mother," says Percy. He casts his mind around for something to say to verify his identity and cannot think of anything about himself that his mother might know.

She raises her eyebrows. "Well?"

"You should check it's me," Percy protests. "What if I were—"

"A Death Eater?" His mother asks pointedly, not even bothering to look meaningfully at his left arm, where the Mark throbs painfully. Percy has almost gotten used to how it feels, though he avoids looking at his arm whenever possible. "I'd say we're past that, Percy. You are my son. I know what your magic feels like. I helped create it with my own body."

"Mother, please," Percy says, his arms beginning to ache from holding them up. "I need to see Father."

A shadow passes behind his mother's eyes, but she does not change her stance. "A bit late to come and pay your respects, isn't it?"

“Mother, *please*,” says Percy again, this time in irritation. He can’t help it; he has to drop his arms, though he is careful not to hold his wand in a way that may appear threatening. “We’ve not much time.”

“No,” she agrees with him coldly. “We don’t have much time, and I don’t think we ought to be spending it with you.”

These words hit Percy as tangibly as a Stinging charm, and he takes a step back, feeling the wooden door behind his back. For all that Ron looks at him with suspicion, Bill with pity, Ginny with mistrust, and the rest of them with cool hatred, he is unprepared to deal with his mother’s outright dismissive anger. He’d rather she were screaming at him and cursing him. For his entire childhood, he’d thought of his mother as a source of noise: loud laughter, loud yelling, loud crying. This woman, with thin cheeks and greying red hair pulled back into a tight bun, is a mystery to him. Percy suddenly thinks of Bellatrix Lestrange.

Percy swallows and then raises his chin, meeting his mother in the eyes. Molly may have killed Bellatrix in one lifetime, but Percy killed her in another. “I need to monitor Father. I have reason to believe his—symptoms are going to worsen today.”

“And why would that be?”

“Someone is going to try and kill the Dark Lord’s snake today,” Percy says carefully. “Father’s magic has been affected by it for the last two years. That connection is what’s been killing him.”

Not entirely a lie, of course. Percy has thought often about the fact that his father was injected with venom from a *Horcrux*. He’d study it, if he could, but this is the best he can do given his current constraints.

This throws Molly visibly, though her wand arm does not flinch. Percy can tell by the way she blinks in surprise and flares her nostrils just slightly that she had not been expecting to hear him say that.

“Who?” Molly says finally.

“What?”

“Who’s going after the snake?”

Percy thinks to himself that it is a shame that Molly and Andromeda do not get along. They both have the tendency to cut straight to the heart of the matter. “I can’t say.”

Molly exhales noisily and then crosses her arms. “Then I have no reason to believe you.”

Percy clenches his jaw. “I *can’t say,* Mother. I really can’t. You don’t know who he is, and to explain would be to put you in terrible danger. Suffice to say that I have reason to believe—no, that I *know*—that the snake is going to die today. I may be wrong about it affecting Father, but I’d rather not take that risk, would you?”

“Forgive me if I don’t immediately let you in,” Molly counters immediately. “I was not aware that you still factored your father and I into your considerations.”

“You know, because of me, dozens of Muggleborns have escaped the country,” Percy snaps back, though he knows it is a foolish thing to say, and that he may have to Obliviate his mother before he leaves. “I’m sorry if it offends your moral compass that I positioned myself to be *useful*—Merlin knows Dumbledore was uninterested in any insights I may have—but others are able to take action on those insights, Mother. I am putting myself in danger every day. I came here as a courtesy because I care for Father. I will not stand here and be insulted like this.”

His mother pauses and gives him an evaluative look. Percy should not be insulted that his own mother doubts that he may be a spy—that she was so ready to believe him a genuine Death Eater—but he is.

“I’m your son,” says Percy, bitterly. “The son most similar to you, even we both wish at times I was not. Maybe you ought to think about what *you* would have done, in my robes.” He is readying himself to overpower her if necessary when she gives him a brisk nod.

“Your father is upstairs,” Molly says abruptly, uncrossing her arms and walking in front of him with quick, even strides. Percy follows her, trying to calm his anger and focus on the task at hand.

The sight of his father, however, stops him two steps into the room. Small and delicately swaddled in the great bed that Percy still remembers from his and Arthur’s mental battle with Tom, his father looks more like a young child than an ageing wizard. Before he can stop himself, Percy turns agonised eyes on his mother, who meets his gaze solidly.

“Yes,” Molly says, in answer to the question that Percy cannot bring himself to ask.

Percy swallows and nods, wiping his suddenly sweaty hands on his robes. He’d worn nice robes to this meeting, stupidly; the dark gray robes that Lucius had silently purchased for him months ago. Percy had perhaps thought his mother would notice how they fell softly around his shoulders, enhancing his height while disguising some of the weediness of his slight frame. Here, in this stifling warm room, his mother only has eyes for Arthur.

Percy moves slowly, not wanting to wake his father, and perches on the edge of the bed. The sturdiness of the frame steadies him. Unbidden, a memory from his first childhood floats into his mind. He’d been ten, nearly eleven, and though he’d been longing to leave Burrow for months, the type of terror that can strike at will had crept into his mind at supper. The room had been so small, so cramped, so *loud*, but the idea of silence had seemed suddenly far more terrifying than the familiar discomfort of home. His father had noticed, and after dinner, he’d called him into the room. He’d sat just like this, though his feet could not quite touch the thick rug underneath, and admitted in a small voice that he was afraid to go to Hogwarts.

Percy cannot remember exactly what Arthur had said, but even decades later, he remembers the warmth of assurance that his father’s words had laid over his shoulders. In this timeline, of course, no such interaction had occurred. In fact, Percy does not think he’d asked either of his parents for any advice since awakening as an adult in a child’s body. For the first time,

Percy realises what he'd stolen from his parents. No wonder his mother looks at him with such suspicion, no wonder he does not feel at home here. He'd stopped thinking of his parents as his parents years ago, and robbed them of years of parenting him, and as a consequence all of those little intimate moments had disappeared as if he'd blown out a candle and wished them away.

The loss of it washes over him in a wave, and he feels sorrow both for himself and for his parents, for all that could have been. He is a stranger to his parents, even if they are not strangers to him. Perhaps if Percy were ever given a third life, he'd try to be a good son, or at least something closer to it.

Then his father moans, a short, aborted sound—something between a gasp and a groan and a cry of pain, his thin lips opening helplessly—and Percy's attention snaps immediately to the present. Arthur's eyes are still closed, but his hand reaches out in front of him, knobbly fingers splayed, as if to ward off an invisible enemy.

"*Arthur,"* Molly cries out and hurries around Percy to clasp Arthur's hand tenderly. His fingers scrabble against Molly's hand and then close around her own fingers, and Percy has to look away and swallow.

He leaves his mother to comfort his father and instead encants a low, murmuring diagnostic charm, one that Tom had taught him a few weeks ago. He realises now why Tom had taken the time to teach it to him; the charm is very informative but incredibly exhausting, and Percy has to maintain a low-level awareness of his own magic throughout the entire thing. Any notions Percy may have harboured of leaving Arthur here under an alarm ward or something similar would be entirely forestalled by the constant effort it takes to maintain the diagnostic charm.

I'm not coming after you, you fool, Percy thinks uncharitably toward whatever version of Tom may live in his head. *Kill the bloody snake and make my life easier.*

Tom doesn't respond, either of them. Percy turns his attention back to Arthur, who is shaking softly in the bed, his eyes still screwed shut. Even in his emancipating state, his eyebrows are thick and bushy, and Percy resolutely passes his eyes over the familiar way Arthur's left eyebrow tufts. He does not have *time* for sentimentality. He has to focus.

The charm informs Percy that Arthur's magic is pulsing and receding in an irregular rhythm that seems, oddly, to resemble a heartbeat, though it does not exactly match Arthur's own. Every time Arthur's magic swells, Arthur gasps again, as if his breath is trapped in his throat, and then gives a relieved exhale when the flow of magic temporarily subsides.

"What is happening to him?" Molly demands, her voice rising as Arthur coughs his way around another swell.

Percy does not respond, noticing with narrowed eyes how Arthur's magic is beating faster, as if the heart is excited—as if it were exultant. "It's *his* heartbeat," Percy whispers to himself, amazed despite himself. He has no proof that it is Tom's heart beating its way through Arthur's magic, but Percy has no trouble imagining the way Tom's heart would quicken at the sight of the snake guarding a part of his soul.

“Whose?”

Percy bites his lip. “I cannot say,” he evades, casting the next incantation in the charm with a low gusting murmur.

“Percival Weasley, you tell me *right now*,” Molly demands, but Percy waves her aside, focusing. The rhythm of the pulses has quickened, and the *thum-thum-thum* of Arthur’s magic, coupled with his hoarse breathing, has Percy enthralled. He can picture it now: Tom, advancing on the snake, his wand drawn; the snake, coiling and hissing, the two parts of Voldemort’s soul speaking to each other in a blend of Parseltongue and words unsaid.

Arthur cries out brokenly, and Percy clasps his other hand before he can think about even moving. Tom must have just struck, maybe immobilised the snake, or begun the long incantation that he’d been practising to extract souls out of mice and rats and kittens in the Minister of Magic’s darkened office.

Percy had seen him do it. Percy had seen him kill a mouse and then revive it with the soul of another mouse. Percy had seen the mouse walk away as if the same, and he had swallowed around a rise of disgust and awe to smile admiringly at Tom. Percy had seen him do the impossible, and he has absolutely no trouble imagining Tom doing it again.

“*Mine,”* Arthur bites out, his eyes flying open, flashing red as he snarls out the word.

“Not yours,” Molly says right back, squeezing Arthur’s fingers even tighter.

Let him go, Tom, begs Percy as he continues to carefully monitor Arthur’s status. He conjures a damp towel and pats at his father’s head, the futility of the action rendering it all the more important. Tom had sent him here to watch his father in pain, had even equipped him with the tools to watch Tom’s battle from afar, but had not taught him how to help his father should it turn dire.

“*Always mine,”* continues Arthur, staring unseeingly at the ceiling, his face twisted into a grimace. With a shout he sits up in bed, Molly and Percy falling back, and points shakily at some unseen figure in front of him. “*You are nothing compared to me. You are mine and you will obey.”*

“What’s happening, Percy?” His mother asks nervously, righting herself and gingerly reaching out for Arthur again. He shakes her off and continues staring savagely at the battle unfolding before his eyes.

Once again, Percy does not respond. His mind is with Tom, facing off against a sliver of his own soul.

His father screams out brokenly, but it is a triumphant scream, and his lips are bared in a terrifying smile. “*Mine,*” he shouts, bellows, and then falls back into bed, whispering nonsense words to himself too quietly for Percy to make out thoroughly.

And then, just like that, he sleeps. Percy checks the diagnostic charm again, but his father seems to be doing…decently, if nothing better. Percy lets out a breath and feels all the stress

in his body collapse into the room, hiding underneath the soft, worn rug and his father's robe, thrown over the armchair in the corner.

"I think it is over," says Percy quietly, not meeting his mother's eyes.

"You are not leaving this house without explaining to me what occurred here," says his mother, calmly, as if she is not still clutching the cool hand of her husband after he'd clearly been possessed.

Percy hesitates and then nods. He will have to say *something*. Or he will have to Obliviate his parents, and Percy does not want to Obliviate his parents. He does not want to remove yet another memory from their shared lives, steal away yet another moment from his mother, who has so few. "The Dark Lord has tied his—life force, his magic, to the snake," he says quietly, searching for a way to explain without revealing any key truths. "And I had reason to believe some of that…force transferred to Father when he was attacked by the snake."

"How did he do that?"

"I do not know," Percy admits. "Perhaps during the ritual when He forged himself a new body. The snake is his familiar…perhaps he invoked some ancient magic."

Molly nods, her face drawn and white, but nevertheless steady. "And the snake is dead?"

"I hope so."

"And since the snake is dead, your father will be—free of this?"

Percy hesitates again, but he cannot lie, not when his mother is still holding his father's hand, both looking so incredibly tired. He cannot lie, not when he is not sure. "I hope so," he repeats.

His mother, being Molly Weasley, notices the evasion immediately. And his mother, being Molly Weasley, asks the correct question, the one that Percy wishes she had not asked. "What can you do to be sure?"

"Wait for me to die, maybe?" Arthur breaks in, his voice rusty, but clearly awake and aware of his surroundings.

For a while, there is no conversation, save Molly exclaiming over Arthur, and Percy's insistence on doing a very thorough series of diagnostic charms to determine that his father seems tired and magically depleted, but otherwise alive and well.

Then, with both of his parents looking at him expectantly, Percy finds that he actually wants to explain the problem to them. He has not thought of them as his parents in years—but they are approaching the age he remembers them as, and he's approaching the age he left his old timeline as, and perhaps selfishly he wants his parents to help him with this problem.

"I need to continue doing what I am doing," Percy says evasively. Then he chokes, suddenly, his throat growing tighter. It is harder to stand in the Burrow and justify his continued actions

than it is to do so in the privacy of his own bed, or in the Ministry's office. Theodora's white, scared face screams at him, and he flinches under her accusing glare. "But how can I?"

Arthur takes a fortifying sip of his tea and then meets Percy with a solid blue gaze. "Is there no other way?"

Percy gives a shrug, some of his poise lapsing into the truculent child he'd once been, many years ago. "I do not think so," he says miserably. "But I don't know if what I'm doing is helping or hurting. I don't…I don't know who I am anymore. I don't know what I'm doing!" On this last, his voice breaks, raising into a muted cry, as tears threaten to swarm into his eyes. It's the sight of the blasted Weasley stockings hung over the fire, of the Christmas tree already glowing, of presents wrapped in green paper. His parents, participating in a mockery of their normal rituals, so aware of their own mortality, and the mortality of their children.

"This is *war*, Percy," his mother says, and when he meets her gaze it sears across him like a blast of dusty wind on a hot day. "Dozens are dying every day. Your father nearly died just now, and I cannot imagine you are any safer."

"I'm helping with it all, *on the wrong side*," Percy says harshly. "I'm helping just in *case* I can take action, when the time comes. But what if it doesn't come? What if I can't take action, and all I can say for my life is that I *helped* with it all?"

"So don't help with it all, just what you need to," says Molly, and Percy's mouth snaps shut as he looks at her for the first time. Something in his mother's eyes flares, and he sees her as she perhaps once was, the young Prewett heir, courted by Lucius Malfoy himself, both brothers murdered for their defiance. The woman who wanted to go to France to duel, the woman who in another world murdered Bellatrix Lestrange without a backward glance.

They are all raised on war, his siblings and his parents and even their parents, and his mother looks at him like they are soldiers on the same battlefield. Perhaps it is not a look of warmth, or maternal love, or even affection—but in her gaze, Percy straightens, and feels for the first time as if he can be equals with his mother, or this strange, fierce, brittle version of his mother that he never knew in his other life.

"I won't ask you what you've been doing," his mother continues. "And I won't judge you for it—not now. There will be plenty of time for judgements at the end. But if you stop now, Percy, it will be for *nothing*."

Severus would agree with you, Percy wants to say, but of course he has retained enough of his caution not to give away anything more. Perhaps his parents have guessed some of the dangerous double-game he is playing every day, but he does not feel compelled to explain himself further, and they do not seem compelled to ask.

Percy's eyes keep getting drawn to the stockings, and he keeps looking down the line for his. When he spots it, something in his chest seizes. *Bill Charlie Percy Fred George Ron Ginny*. Will they hang his stocking for him when he's inevitably died, or will they include it out of loyalty? His mum hung Fred's stocking for both the awful Christmases in Percy's past life, but she'd actually liked Fred, so he can't be sure whether he would merit the same treatment.

“Help where you must, and hurt where you can,” Molly says, her voice flat. “And do not lose sight of what you are doing.”

“Perhaps some of…them may be reasoned with,” interjects his father, hopefully.

“Nobody can be reasoned with, Father!” Percy cannot help but cry, wrenching his eyes away from his mother only to look at his father, oddly childish, wrapped in the overlapping red and white squares of the quilt his mother made when Ginny turned ten. “Nobody can be reasoned with. Not the Dementors, not the Death Eaters, not Harry, not anyone. I have to do this. I *have to*, if we’ll ever sleep at night, otherwise even if *He* is gone, we’ll never really be sure.”

“Then do it,” says his mother harshly. “Do it, and stop dithering.”

Do it for me, Percy wants to say plaintively, but he stops himself. *Help me stop dithering*. Severus would tell him the same thing, and Tom besides.

Tom.

With a start, Percy leaps to his feet. “I need to go,” he says, summoning his cloak wandlessly while he scrabbles for his shoes. “Be safe, Father. Owl me if anything changes. Actually, don’t. I’ll check on you, quietly.” At the door, he turns and babbles nonsensically, “I started painting because of you, Mother. And we would not be here if I hadn’t.”

“Percy—” his mother calls out behind him, but he ignores her for the final time that day, flying out of the house and Apparating as soon as he reaches the safe point outside the wards.

He needs to see Tom, *now*.

***

Tom is waiting for him, back in Percy’s apartment.

Tom is waiting for him on Percy’s own couch, his long legs crossed, wearing what looks very much like a set of Percy’s robes, the left side of his mouth pulled higher than the right in a smirk that seems perfectly inscribed on his pale, smooth face. His eyes are clear and bright, his dark hair is loosely tousled, and his skin shines with a faint sheen of sweat. In short, Tom looks very much alive, and, more critically, very much not a portrait, though the frame still hangs empty above Tom’s head.

Percy stops in his tracks, his wand loosely held in his right hand, as he gapes at the very solid figure of Tom Riddle for the first time. He’d seen him in his memories, of course, but always insubstantial, his figure always slightly distorted. *This* was something else entirely, even more vivid than the Tom that had appeared to Percy in his own soul.

“Tom?”

Tom's smirk widens into a self-satisfied smile, the kind of smile that Percy is intimately familiar with after all this time. But seeing it cross Tom's face—his real face—makes Percy realise in an instance how much more *alive* Tom is now, as compared to any of the Toms that Percy has seen. The diary was a cool breeze wafting in from a door left open; this Tom, whatever he may be, exudes icy-cold energy that blows past Percy's thick robes and spreads goosebumps over his skin.

"What—so it worked?" Percy manages, stepping inside his door and closing it securely behind him. Of course the door will not keep Tom in, but perhaps it will keep any enemies out.

Tom's grin widens even more, and he straightens on the couch, his eyes gleaming with excitement. "I got the snake," he confirms with a slanted glance to the side, as if he does not care very much about what he is saying. This trick does not work on Percy; Percy is more intimately familiar with Tom's expressions than he is his own, given Percy's general disinclination for mirrors and photographs, and his unabiding obsession with various pieces of Tom's soul. "I took its soul—*my* soul—back into my body. It worked perfectly, of course."

Percy takes another few steps inside. He can't look away from Tom, from the living, breathing, *solid* body of Tom Riddle just a few metres away. "Tom—Tom, that's amazing," he breathes, and his praise is completely genuine. To take Nagini's soul and absorb it into his own…Percy had seen him do it to mice, but for Tom to transform the same ritual for his own purposes…Tom truly is the greatest wizard of their time, particularly now that Dumbledore is dead. "And your *body!"*

"Nice, isn't it?" Tom says, preening under Percy's appreciative gaze. Tom looks to be in his late twenties or perhaps his early thirties, older than the sixteen year old boy that Percy is more familiar with, but younger than Percy's portrait made him seem. "My little secret."

"How did you—" Percy stops himself short. Perhaps he does not want to know.

Tom chuckles amusedly. "No," he says, as if in response to Percy's thoughts. "Let's not delve too deeply into the shadows, shall we? Suffice to say I obtained myself a body in full working order. And your father?"

"Well," Percy says, still discomfited by the surreal experience of speaking to Tom Riddle as if he were a real-life man in front of him. Then he shakes his head and tries to bring himself firmly back to reality. If Tom is here—if Tom succeeded in removing the soul from the snake—then Tom has become infinitely more powerful, even as Percy's task has become easier. It is more vital now than ever that Tom trusts him. "Thank you, Tom," he says with feeling, taking another step forward until the icy chill of Tom's magic is nearly overpowering. "I will not forget what you have done for me."

"No," Tom agrees. He flicks his wrist and a thin black wand appears in his hand. "I will need a new wand. I—obtained this from Ollivander's old shop, though as we know, *He* took care to relieve Ollivander of his most valuable items. It will do for now, but it is hardly sufficient for what is to come."

“And what is to come?” Percy dares ask. With one final step, he reaches the small interior of his living room and drops into the armchair opposite the couch, his shoes brushing the edge of the very same rug that has seen far too much.

Tom looks up from handling the wand and quirks his lips at Percy. “Well, as we know, Harry Potter is another Horcrux; the locket remains likely with Sirius Black; and *He* is still at large.”

“—and hopefully oblivious,” Percy interjects.

Tom smiles thinly and turns the wand gently over in his hands. “I believe He *is* oblivious. He senses himself growing weaker, but he does not think to check on the Horcruxes. I think he is frightened that I may think to check up on them myself if he shows interest in them. He believes he is the only one that knows of the Horcruxes after the diary.”

Percy hadn’t considered that. Of course introducing Tom would trigger the Dark Lord to consider his other Horcruxes; but equally so, of course the Dark Lord would not want to bring Tom’s attention to them if he believes he is the only one to know their secrets.

Percy tries to imagine not trusting a fragment of his own soul and concludes, not for the first time, that to be Tom Riddle must be incredibly lonely. “What did you tell him, about Nagini?”

“Nothing,” says Tom, in surprise. “I left one of the Death Eaters there, with a bloodied knife in his hands. I forget his name—the one with that horrid moustache and the ratty eyes.”

“Avery,” says Percy with apprehension. “So you plan to make the Dark Lord think *Avery* killed the snake? Why would he do that?”

“Because it will look like it killed his wife, of course,” says Tom impatiently. “I left both of their bodies there.”

“Right,” says Percy faintly. It should not shock him, of course; Tom’s casual disregard for human life. But he knew Avery, and his wife, with mousy brown hair and a quick, nervous demeanour. Avery had graduated just a few years before Percy.

Then Percy shakes his head. *One less Death Eater down,* he tells himself firmly. Though it is no easier for Percy to stomach the death of a Death Eater that he knows than it is to contemplate the death of a Muggleborn classmate. Perhaps that is his true moral failing, at the end of it all; Severus had told him to value all human life the same, and Percy, like a sheep, obeyed to the letter of the law.

Tom continues with disgust, “He is not in the country. I cannot understand why he is so obsessed with wands—as if sharing a core with the Potter boy means anything other than coincidence.”

“But the Death Eaters are not growing weaker, even if the Dark Lord is,” Percy points out, returning to Tom’s earlier point. Day by day the Dark Lord’s hold on Wizarding society seems to grow inexorably tighter. Percy hasn’t heard of a Mudblood capture in days; most of

them are languishing in Azkaban under Yaxley's lackadaisical watch, or dead, or long-since fled. The Order presumably is continuing to stage some sort of resistance, but Severus informs him their efforts are largely confined to helping refugees flee the country.

Tom shrugs one shoulder. On another, the gesture may seem lazy or unrefined; on Tom, he incorporates it into the sinuous movements of his body, so that the shrug seems both inevitable and novel. Percy cannot tear his eyes away. "They will follow me, once they realise I am a better version of him. Percy, can you not see what is to come? If I can take the soul from the locket, from Potter, from *Him*—I will be unmatched."

Of course that will be Tom's goal; Percy feels incredibly stupid to have believed that Tom would be content only with the portion of the soul hidden inside Nagini. If Tom can absorb nearly half his soul back, he would truly be unmatched. Percy shudders to think of it.

"What do you need from me?"

"We need Harry Potter," says Tom instantly, as if he had been waiting for Percy to be brave enough to ask. "Get me Harry Potter. I will deal with *Him*."

"How?"

"I have been thinking about the prophecy," Tom says. "I think if I absorb the Horcrux from Potter, perhaps the prophecy will apply to Him and I. Harry Potter is naught but a vessel."

This is an interesting point. Percy had not considered that the prophecy may not apply to Harry, but rather to the Horcrux itself within Harry. *Born as the seventh month dies…Power the Dark Lord knows not*. Perhaps that is a valid interpretation of events.

"But that means you may have to kill *Him* and forsake the soul," Percy feels compelled to point out. "And you may be wrong. I would say that you should let one of them kill the other. I would let Harry kill *Him*. His magic is tainted; we've both felt it. We do not know what his soul will do to you. Let Harry defeat Him and then take your soul back from Harry, and you will be free of Him and the prophecy besides."

Let Harry defeat *Him*, and they have one less thing to worry about. Perhaps Percy can find a way to extract the soul from Harry before Tom comes after him, or perhaps Harry has to die, and that was always true, even in the other timeline. Perhaps Harry has to die so the rest of them can live.

Harry, Percy thinks, would be reconciled to this, if he felt there were no other option.

If Percy can keep Tom occupied with the Dark Lord, and if Percy can find Harry and therefore the locket, perhaps Percy can remove all of the pieces from the chessboard except for Tom and the Dark Lord. One of them will die, presumably, and then Percy and Severus and the rest of the Order besides can figure out how to kill whoever survives.

Even if it's Tom.

Tom nods thoughtfully. "Do you think the boy capable of defeating Him?"

“No,” says Percy honestly. “But regardless of who wins the fight, you can easily defeat the victor.”

“Find him,” orders Tom, as if the Dark Lord had not said the same. Part of Percy wants to go and find Harry today—to follow Ron, or Harry’s magic, or use the Dementor to pinpoint precisely where their errant Chosen One may be hiding. But the other part of him is not confident that he can keep *that* a secret. Percy maintains his many secrets by merely keeping his head down; the Dark Lord rarely enters his head, and Percy is capable by now of going through the torture without concern for his secrets, given the Unbreakable Vow he had taken with Severus would kill him before he revealed key truths to the Dark Lord. But if Percy had been in close contact to Harry, would any of the other Horcruxes be able to sense it? Perhaps the Dark Lord already knows precisely how to retrieve Harry and wants to wait until he has a suitable wand before challenging him. If that was the case, Percy certainly does not want to openly approach the boy.

“Yes,” says Percy obediently. He thinks that very soon it will be worth taking the risk to find Harry, to destroy the diary and the Horcrux inside Harry if possible. The Dementor had said it not possible, but Percy is *researching* and he is damned well determined to find a way out of the impossible. But having a plan—having resolve—soothes him, even as it scares him. He can handle Tom having a body. Tom has had a presence in his life long before he had a body. If Harry can kill the Dark Lord, Percy can…finish Tom. Or perhaps Severus can, or Andromeda, or McGonagall. Or perhaps Tom will not prove to be a threat to their way of living, and Percy will be able to persuade him to call off the Death Eaters and just *live* in peace. He looks at Tom contemplatively. Tom, he feels, would find it a waste to return to a body only to destroy it in war.

(*I just want to live*, says Tom. *I am tired of death.)*

Tom catches his gaze and raises an eyebrow. “What,” he says, amusedly. “Do you believe this to be an illusion?”

Caught, Percy flushes and then shakes his head. It is *remarkable* how much Tom has changed since Percy first knew him as a prickly sixteen year old, and then a cold and calculating man. Even after Tom believed Percy to betray him, even after Severus forced him to swear a vow, Tom has *mellowed.* He did not have to return to Percy's apartment, once free to walk about in his own body. He did not have to update Percy on how he had destroyed the snake. He almost seems to *enjoy* Percy's company, or at least value it. Percy would not have believed it if he did not see the difference himself.

“I just can’t believe it,” says Percy, some of the wild incredulity and stress that has simmered in his body all evening tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Tom, it’s *you*.”

Tom uncrosses his long legs and leans forward, extending one slim hand. Percy’s mouth goes dry. “Go on,” says Tom lowly, and Percy swallows hard at the soft, almost dangerous challenge in Tom’s voice. “I may offer this only once, Percy. Or are you too...scared?”

Percy reaches out a trembling hand himself. His living room is small enough that Percy, leaning forward, can just reach Tom; and he flinches violently as their fingers brush, and a

spark travels down Percy's hand and throbs softly in his Mark, an echo of the heartbeat he'd heard earlier in his father.

Tom feels *real*, his skin cool but very much flush with blood and magic and life. Percy cannot help himself; he reaches out again, and Tom watches him impassively as he traces the tip of his index finger across Tom's fingers, and then lower across Tom's palm.

"You're *here*," Percy says, and it catches in his throat. To his surprise, he feels tears welling up in the corner of his eyes, and he blinks them angrily away, the flush in his cheeks burning more brightly. Tom will think him pathetic, weak, despicable, and he can't have that, not now.

But Tom surprises him. He catches Percy's fingers with his own and then slides his hand around Percy's until their palms are touching, Percy's rough fingers against Tom's silky-smooth ones, the spark between them pulsing with Tom's heartbeat.

"You know, I half expected you to see me here and try to kill me," Tom says, lightly tracing the tips of Percy's fingers with his. "But you wanted me to return." Percy freezes, and Tom scrapes his fingernail against the pads of Percy's fingers. "I have the diadem's power," he continues softly. "You always forget. I know you have thought about killing me. But you do not wish for me to die. You want me to live."

Percy finds to his horror that the tears that had begun to gather in his eyes are swelling, stinging his eyes. If Tom is saying it, it must be true, for Tom *can* see Percy's soul, can't he? And yes, perhaps Percy does not want Tom to die, and perhaps while he distantly feels anxiety and fear over the idea that Tom has a body now, he also feels a sudden surge of relief that he is not alone.

"You want me to live," Tom repeats to himself. "Good, as I have no intentions of dying ever again."

He pulls his hand away and Percy lets his own drop into his lap, his fingers suddenly bereft of Tom's light touch. As he'd said once to Myrtle, his feelings for Tom were—complicated, but his feelings for the Dark Lord were very clear indeed.

Kill Him first, Percy tells himself later that night, after Tom has disappeared to wherever he chooses to disappear to, and Percy is once again alone in his bed. *Kill Him first*, *and the rest will follow.*

***

Percy should have expected that both he and Severus be invited to Tom's grand unveiling to Voldemort. Had Tom asked Percy, Percy would have politely requested that he be as far away as possible, preferably on another continent, with plenty of plausible deniability. But even if he could have said that to Tom, he would have known it was hopeless.

If Percy knows one thing about Tom, it is that Tom enjoys an audience.

But at first, Percy does not suspect that he is being summoned to see such a confrontation. When his Mark burns the next day, late at night, he is already in bed, a steaming cup of tea by his side, an herbaceous blend of yerba mate only thirty seconds from being fully brewed. He isn't sure he quite likes the taste of this new tea, but he enjoys how the smell fills his entire apartment. It makes him feel marginally less lonely.

Percy's tea timer rings before his Mark stops burning, and he defiantly grabs the mug of tea and takes a scalding sip. Just for *once* he'd like to have an evening to himself. Just for *once* he'd like the Dark Lord to bugger off and leave him *alone*.

Focus, says Tom, from somewhere, perhaps sensing Percy's agitation, or perhaps Percy is just conjuring ghosts out of his own imagination again.

Regardless, Percy heeds the warning. He takes another sip of his tea—still warm, but more bearable after a quick wandless Cooling charm—and clears his head, taking a precious few minutes to complete a quick set of breathing exercises. Another minute to dress in his fine robes (and to note that he is nearly out of fine robes and needs to either employ a house elf or drop them off to be cleaned) and another to take him out of his flat, check on his wards, and then disappear to Malfoy Manor.

At this hour, Malfoy Manor rises, ghost-like, directly from the grounds, emerging in a smoky blaze of white from the long, silver grass. The full moon drips its mist onto the spires of the manor, and the great white peacocks caw their sorrows into the air. Percy shivers, pulls his robes tighter to him, and hurries up the walk to the front door.

Severus is just inside, drying the dew off of his boots with an efficient spell. Nodding at Percy, he points his wand at Percy's dress shoes and does the same.

Percy does not ask why they've been summoned here. The Dark Lord does not like his followers to delay.

But the house elf leads them to a small parlour, not to the main ballroom. Percy notices with some discomfort that it is the room where he used to see Mr. Barrington. He recognises the graceful chairs, the ones that are surprisingly comfortable despite their bony appearance, and the round velvet pouffes which can balance a tray of tea or of paints. This is the room that Narcissa used specifically because Lucius rarely went in.

Narcissa is not there, but Tom is, one long leg crossed over the other, sitting in a chair opposite to the Dark Lord.

Percy nearly bumps into Severus, who stops short at the sight of Tom, in the flesh. He does not do anything as stupid as speak to Percy, but he gives Percy a dark glance that promises retribution. And yes, Percy had not yet written to Severus that Tom had returned in corporal form, but it hasn't even been a full twenty-four hours.

"Come in," says Voldemort, not taking his eyes off Tom. "I believe you two are already acquainted."

Tom smiles and nods at Severus and Percy, who file in slowly. Tom looks perfectly comfortable in his surroundings, though Voldemort is clearly on edge, his nostril-slits flaring, and his forehead creased in anger.

Severus takes the seat next to Voldemort, which leaves Percy sitting next to Tom. He gives Tom a weak smile and then bows his head to Voldemort, murmuring, "My Lord."

"*Tom* was just about to tell us all how he returned to a body," snaps Voldemort, his voice cutting.

Tom smiles serenely, as if oblivious to the eddies of tension gathering at the banks of the room. "It's a fascinating story, really—I'm glad you both are here for it."

Percy is torn between watching Tom and the Dark Lord as Tom tells his story in a bright, airy tone, as if he is recounting his latest Quidditch game, or successful political manoeuvre at work. Percy has heard many men Tom's age tell stories like this in the pub after work, gesturing with their hands, their faces proud and animated.

But it seems artificial on Tom's face, a thin veneer stretched over his stunningly vivid features. Tom does not *chat*. He does not *brag*, at least, not in the way that someone might brag about their latest promotion, or their latest pretty conquest. Midway through the story—Tom had witnessed Avery kill the snake, he'd felt the magic filling the air, he acted to use it unconsciously—it occurs to Percy that Tom is doing this on purpose, exaggerating the incongruity of his demeanour with his person.

Then Tom smiles at the Dark Lord, bright and sharp. "And so I thought we ought to work together, for the interim."

"Work together," says Voldemort flatly. Percy aches with embarrassment for both of them, and for he and Severus too. Why had they been invited to this? An insurance policy, for both parties?

Tom nods eagerly. "I will bring you Harry Potter," says Tom enticingly. "He does not know my face; he does not fear me."

"My Lord," Severus interjects, sending a ripple of shock through the room as both versions of the Dark Lord tear their attention away from each other. "Many of the Death Eaters who have been with you would recognise…your younger face."

Voldemort nods slowly, his attention returning to Tom, caught by the perplexing complexities of his younger face. Percy wonders what it would feel like to see his own face mirrored back at him, a face from another timeline, from another life. Not pleasant, he supposes. "And why," Voldemort whispers softly. "Would you volunteer for this task?"

"We are bound, you and I," Tom says, leaning forward. Percy is struck by the similarities in their profiles, even with Voldemort's strange, snake-like visage. He can tell instantly that they are shadows cast by the same figure, though shadows rendered at different times of the day. "We cannot harm each other, nor do we want to, not when we are more powerful together than we are apart."

Percy very carefully does not allow himself to react to this outright lie. Severus' face is equally as impassive.

"I have thought often of this," Tom continues softly. The Dark Lord nods, as if hypnotised. "We *must* find a solution that allows us both to thrive."

"And the boy? Why would you bring me him?"

"He is our greatest threat," hisses Tom, and he and Voldemort make that familiar gesture of disgust, lips pursed, eyes away. "The prophecy is our greatest weakness. Let us dispose of him, and then we can decide what to do next."

Voldemort laughs softly, the sound incredibly unsettling. He has, consciously or unconsciously, mimicked Tom's pose, his dark robes flowing over his seated form. "And how can I trust you?"

"How can I trust you?" Tom counters, raising an ironic eyebrow. "We *must* trust each other. Who else can we trust? Would you betray yourself?"

Watching Voldemort's face carefully, Percy notes the smallest calculating smirk briefly cross the Dark Lord's face. Tom seems to be supremely unperturbed, as if unaware that his words have not been as convincing as he'd hoped.

Indeed, Percy and Severus are bid to stay behind after Tom's audience with the Dark Lord has finished. Tom manages to excuse himself even after the clear dismissal from the Dark Lord, as if he were in control of the particulars of the meeting. Percy wants to groan in frustration, watching how Voldemort tracks Tom's departure with an irritated grimace.

Voldemort motions for Severus to speak first, which Percy is not ashamed to admit is a great relief. Severus bows his head in acknowledgement of the honour and then says bluntly, "My Lord, he is not to be trusted."

"It has gone wrong," agrees Voldemort, his gaze swinging wildly around the room. Percy has the unsettling realisation that perhaps the Dark Lord is *frightened.* "The magic to create it—him—it was not meant to be used in this way."

Percy moves to speak even before Severus can cue him to the same. "I apologise, my Lord," he says bravely, inclining his head in shame. "I fear it was I who helped bring him to this form."

Voldemort pins him under an intent glare. "And what did you do, to bring him to a portrait?"

"I painted the portrait and brewed the standard portraiture potion, my Lord," says Percy, caught by surprise by the question. "The potion requires a *representative sample* of the person to be immortalised; I merely used the diary." At the last second, Percy is able to say *diary* instead of *diadem* without stuttering, to fit with the story they had originally told the Dark Lord.

“I supervised it myself, my Lord,” Severus says. “He made no modifications to the potion. I can procure you a recipe for it.”

“They are all at risk,” Voldemort mutters, mostly to himself. “They can all betray me.”

What would it feel like, Percy wonders, not for the first time, to have your soul be willing to betray yourself, to not question the threat you pose to your own survival? Percy has made mistakes, a multitude of them, mistakes that felt to him like he was preventing his own success. He hates himself, sometimes, for those mistakes, for his arrogance, his ineptitude. But they are *his* mistakes.

“My Lord, I think it best to distract *him*,” Severus says carefully. Percy nods supportively. “Set him on a course for the boy, if you feel it safe. Keep him away from the other Death Eaters.”

“And you?” Voldemort asks abruptly, turning to Percy. “You have spoken to him often. What would you have me do?”

The last thing they want is for Voldemort to feel compelled to collect the other Horcruxes and keep them close to him. Percy worries his lip and then says, carefully, “My Lord, I have surmised that there are…others…like Tom, though less…active. I would agree with Severus, my Lord. If he were to find those and…utilise them…it could be disastrous. I would imagine you do not want to destroy him, but there must be a way to contain him so that he may not find the others. I do not believe he…knows their forms, or their locations. To draw attention to them would be…folly.”

“He has changed form, twice,” muses Voldemort, his gaze distant, tapping one finger against his lips in a familiar gesture of contemplation. “Perhaps he can change form thrice, to something inert.”

“It is worth researching, my Lord.”

Percy’s mind feels tangled; Tom has stymied him with this latest development, which was perhaps Tom’s intention all along. Percy does not know whether he wants Tom to be free, which is dangerous but also advantageous, to a point; or whether he ought to help Voldemort *contain* Tom, or destroy him altogether. Sometimes, Percy feels like he is balancing precariously between these two, Harry dangling below, liable to be crushed if either side gains too much power. If Voldemort is too strong for them to defeat him, they will be unsuccessful; but the same could be said of Tom.

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Severus, when they meet after the meeting by mutual agreement for a pint in a nearby Muggle town, the pub packed despite the late hour, looks equally conflicted. After a quick

exchange with the bartender, Severus finds that there are rooms to let by the hour. Percy ignores the leer of the bartender as he follows Severus silently up the stairs.

Percy waits silently in the hallway as Severus sets up the wards. At Severus' rough gesture, Percy steps inside the room. He feels the uncomfortable prickle of the wards as they snap through them; for one heart-stopping second, he is suspended in space, not yet fully materialised in the room, but not in his flat either, and the wards slick over his skin like oily water before they recede and he is allowed final entry.

Severus must feel relatively safe with the precautions he took because he does not bother with a glamour. As such, Percy can see in detail how his hair hangs, greasy and matted, down his back, how his teeth are stained yellow from tea, how the bags under his eyes look soft and puffy, as if even the slightest touch would pain.

Percy looks considerably better, despite the shocks of the evening. He may be a double agent of sorts, contemplating how best to talk an old woman into suicide, but he is also the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister and damned if he isn't going to look the part. The low-level glamour he keeps up to hide the stress lines is second nature to him now, and he always strives to wear fresh, clean robes of respectable quality.

"This war is going to kill me," Severus says, after he and Percy verify their identities, a ritual that Severus insists on despite them having travelled from the same place. (He must be feeling particularly horrid; he asked Percy a nasty question on an obscure Potions theory they had briefly looked into regarding the origins of the Draught of Despair, and when it had taken Percy a few seconds to recall the relevant text, he'd glowered over Percy with his wand drawn as if eager to apprehend a pretender. Percy had asked Severus for his mother's name: *Eileen*).

"What's happened?"

"Your bloody sister tried to break into my office—*again*, I might add—to steal the Sword of Gryffindor," Severus says, rolling his eyes. He holds up a hand to forestall Percy. "I sent her to detention with Hagrid. I didn't want you nosing about, so I elected to not tell you until now. I believe Potter is in contact with her, somehow, unless it was your instruction that led her to risk her life attempting to carry these through the castle." Severus withdraws a wrapped bundle from inside his robes. Percy opens it carefully, slicing through the wrappings with a neat little charm, and lets out a soft gasp when he sees the four small fangs nestled within.

"I wonder how she got inside the Chamber," Percy says uncomfortably. "I haven't contacted Ginny, but I wouldn't be surprised if Harry somehow was passing messages to her." He transfigures a bit of the wrapping into a small, straight stick and uses it to nudge the end of the fang. When he looks at the stick again, the edge that had touched the fang is shrivelled and black.

Severus raises an eyebrow. "The wrappings are covered in ice wasp wax. Why?"

"Even ice wasp wax wouldn't prevent the basilisk venom from—oh. You used twice-rotten fairy plums?"

“Evidently. And I would remind you, your sister is perfectly familiar with the Chamber,” Severus says icily. Percy winces.

“I see you’re in a foul mood today.” Percy hesitates. “Don’t get mad.”

Severus exhales heavily through his nose. “What asinine plan do you have now?”

“We need to break into Dumbledore’s tomb,” Percy says guiltily. He recoils at the look in Severus’ eyes: rage, but resigned rage that is nevertheless quietly terrifying.

“Planning to resurrect him as well, are we?” Severus inquires nastily. “I know where his father is buried. I suppose one of us shall play the part of his enemy, or will you be his loyal servant?”

Percy ignores this. Severus is clearly spoiling for a fight, but—Percy reminds himself, with some effort—Percy can remain on task. “It’s the Elder Wand. You saw what I saw tonight. The Dark Lord is going to challenge Tom, perhaps consolidate his Horcruxes. He is going to need to intensify his power, and he is searching for wands, often. It’s a miracle he’s not already approached the tomb.”

“And, pray tell, what do you think will happen when he learns that someone, presumably a very powerful wizard, stole the Elder Wand from Albus Dumbledore’s tomb? Will he not assume it to be the work of Albus’ murderer? I’ll be dead by the end of the week.”

Percy hesitates and then says firmly, “I thought we would pin it on Lucius."

Severus stares at him for a long second and then pinches his nose with slender fingers. He avoids the bed that lays sagging in the middle of the room and takes a seat in the old, creaking chair besides. Percy eyes the bed dubiously and then gingerly perches on the edge, coughing as dust billows from below. Better dust, he figures, than some other noxious substance; at least its presence implies disuse, rather than the disgusting opposite. Percy thinks of the bartender’s leer and shudders.

When they are situated thus, Severus leans forward and says precisely, “I cannot allow Lucius to die.”

Whatever Percy had been expecting Severus to say, a defence of Lucius Malfoy had not been high on his list. He blinks, nonplussed, and rather weakly says, “Why not?”

“I owe Lucius…” Severus trails off, looking uncomfortable. He coughs, and pink gently tinges the edges of his cheeks. “A debt.”

“A *debt*?” Percy cannot imagine the kind of debt that Severus would owe Lucius, particularly that would make Severus look so discomfited. “What kind of debt? A life debt?”

“Lucius…protected me,” Severus says carefully. “When I was young and in need of protection.”

“I doubt he would have *protected you* and not asked for payment five times over,” Percy objects. Then, struck by the thought, “What do you mean, he protected you? Like when you

were in school?" Had they even intersected in school? Percy frowns as he calculates the dates. Surely Lucius had not directly overlapped with Severus? Perhaps right at the end…

Severus shakes his head. "It is none of your concern."

"Come on," Percy urges, sensing a good story. "You're the only person I talk to, aside from Tom. I hardly am going to tell anyone. All I've done in *weeks* is review reports of dead Muggleborns and asinine purebloods."

Severus smirks at that, surprisingly. "I did warn you that this job was not particularly pleasant, did I not?"

"I thought you described it as simple and rewarding, actually," Percy quips, pleased to see some of the tension leaving Severus' body. "What's the story? *Please,* Severus. I shan't judge you."

"It is sufficient to say that I was young, alone, and angry when I graduated from school," Severus says shortly, though not angrily as before. "Lucius took me in as his ward. He allowed me to live with him, he purchased robes and books for me, and he schooled me in many things I had not yet experienced."

Percy raises an eyebrow. "Like Dark Magic?"

"Among other things, yes," Severus says. Percy examines him closely and then stares.

"You're blushing," he accuses, delighted. "You're blushing. Tell me, Severus. What else did he *school you in*?"

Before Percy can register that he just teased his ex-professor, Severus responds coolly, "Things I imagine you have little experience in yourself. Suffice to say that without his instruction I would be dead by now."

Percy contemplates the wisdom of another joke, but taking a look at Severus' face, wisely chooses not to respond. Privately in his mind, he marvels at the insinuation that Lucius cared for Severus, took him in, and was...intimate with him. He cannot imagine Severus being intimate with anyone, though of course immediately as he thinks it he begins to wonder what precisely that would be like. And Severus, with *Lucius*?

"Well," Percy says instead of tormenting himself further, "Luckily for you, I had not envisioned we sacrifice Lucius. I rather thought we would make it look like Lucius realised that Draco could be the master of the Elder Wand, defeated him in combat, and then sought Dumbledore's wand for his own."

Severus nods thoughtfully. "And then, having secured the most powerful wand in the world for his own, he leaves his wife and child and flees the country?"

"Well, not forever," Percy objects. "And he wouldn't leave Narcissa and Draco. And Lucius is not stupid. He would not immediately challenge the Dark Lord. He would gather resources and power. It will occupy the Dark Lord to try and find Lucius, which may buy us time."

“Where would we hide him that would escape the Dark Lord’s notice?”

“I’m sure Lucius has a family home he could hide in.”

Severus shakes his head. “The idea is not without merit, but Lucius is hardly going to flee the Dark Lord’s side, so close to the end.”

“Will he if Draco’s life is threatened?” Percy asks. “I mean, we could point out that Draco could very well be the master of the wand, and the Dark Lord is looking as we speak for the Elder Wand. Draco could easily be dead within the month.”

Severus purses his lips as he considers it. “Perhaps,” he says slowly. “But you forget that Potter must win the wand, so we must now arrange a confrontation in addition to an escape, all without the Dark Lord’s knowledge.”

“We are killing off pieces of his soul without his knowledge,” Percy says dryly. “I think we can perhaps manage this too.”

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December 1997

Tom, for all he had told Voldemort he was tracking down Harry, spends the next few weeks experimenting with his magic. Percy watches him and is reminded of his own first few years in his new body, training his magical core to re-learn the intricacies of magic.

Tom does not have quite the same challenges, though Percy does notice that Tom is fatigued far more often by difficult spells than the Dark Lord presumably is. Tom’s grasp of advanced magical theory is several years ahead of Percy, his skill with wandless and wordless magic is astounding, and his ability to force a stream of pure magic to his will without incantation or wand-movement is unlike anything Percy has seen before.

But he can tell that Tom is not satisfied, that his magic is not responding to him as fluidly as he remembered. *Good*, thinks Percy uncharitably, seeing how the edges of Tom’s mouth twitch with irritation. *Stay there for a while.*

Percy is so busy that he cannot even breathe. His efforts to divert information or funds toward the Order have slowed, of late, given that he has not been spending as much time at the Ministry as he’d like, and the types of secrets he does overhear—that Voldemort is afraid of his own Horcruxes and searching for the Elder Wand—are not the type he can pass lightly to Tonks.

But the holiday season does bring a small respite. Even Death Eaters cannot be horrible twelve months of the year. Children return home after the Hogwarts term, elderly parents must be duly visited, gifts must be obtained for those fortunate enough to have a Yule log burning or Christmas tree openly glittering in their windows. Diagon Alley regains some of

its former energy, the shopkeepers that survived the purge hesitantly putting out charmed signs to advertise their winter sales.

The holiday season also brings the upsetting news that Harry, Ron, and Hermione have fled Grimmauld Place. Tonks catches Percy on his way into the office at five-thirty in the morning, dressed as Kathleen from Accounting, and engages Percy in a bewildering discussion about expenses for the Minister's upcoming trip to France—bewildering largely in part because the Minister is not going to France, and also because Tonks' understanding of bureaucratic accounting seems to have been pulled from a perplexing Muggle romance novel set in a corporate office—until they are alone in the Minister's office. Pius is still presumably asleep, not having been ordered to report to the office until nine, for which Percy envies him.

"Just stop," Percy says loudly, over Tonks' exaggerated insistence that they must balance the *credits and debits* of the *travel expenses* before the *end of the quarter.* "Either you're being possessed, or you're not Kathleen."

Tonks pouts at him and changes her eyes to blue, which is their usual signal that it is Tonks. "I thought I was doing decently there."

"Credits and debits?" Percy repeats dubiously. "Honestly, *Kathleen*, I know seventh years at Hogwarts that understand the intricacies of the financial system more than you do. Why are you here?"

Tonks deflates then and looks around her nervously, quirking Kathleen's eyebrows to ask Percy if he'd enacted the proper wards. He nods impatiently in response. "It's Sirius," Tonks says quietly. "He's dead."

"*What?"*

Tonks nods somberly. "No clue what happened, unfortunately. Mum felt…she felt the wards transfer ownership to her, late last night. She went over this morning and the Trio was gone."

"Oh, bloody hell," Percy mutters, sinking into the Minister's plushy leather chair. "So they're gone?"

"They left some traces that they've been living there, rooms with mugs and plates, clothes in the dressers, things like that," Tonks confirms. "Kreacher was too distraught to say anything of use. All he would do is mumble about *Master Regulus and Master Sirius*. But I think something happened, maybe a Death Eater made it through the wards. There's some signs of a struggle, curse marks and such."

Tom. "Was there a locket?" Percy asks urgently, pinning Tonks under an intense stare. "Did your mother say?"

Tonks hesitates and then shakes her head. "I'm not sure."

"I need to go there. Now, Tonks."

"But—"

"*Now, Tonks.*"

For a heartbeat, Tonks looks at him with puzzled confusion, maybe at the steel of command in his tone, or at his sudden urgency. She seems to find something in his face that comforts her, for after that heartbeat she nods and then extends her hand. "Mum's still there. I can take you there now."

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To be inside Grimmauld Place after all this time is eerie. As Tonks had said, there are clear signs that the Trio had been living here full-time with Sirius for months: a book lying on the kitchen table, next to an abandoned cup of tea; a wonky, half-knit hat draped over the side of an armchair; a chess-set on the table near the fire, in the middle of a game, where white was absolutely decimating black. Andromeda is in Regulus' room, where Sirius' body is lying in Regulus' bed, an expression of pained grief still marring his still face. Andromeda is half-leaning over her cousin, her hand smoothing a curl of hair over his forehead, her fingers trembling.

"Madam Tonks," Percy says quietly to announce his presence. Tonks hovers behind him, clearly uncomfortable at the sight.

Andromeda flinches violently and turns, a curse spinning out of her wand. Percy had been expecting it and deflects it easily. "Percy," Andromeda sighs, turning back to Sirius, though her lips firm and her hand stills as she registers that she is no longer alone. "I thought you might come."

"The locket, is it here?"

Andromeda bites her lip, an expression that seems out of place on her aged face, and nods slowly. She steps aside to reveal that Sirius, in his final moments, had been wearing the Horcrux, his hand clasped tightly around it.

Percy reaches out a hesitant finger and touches the gold chain of the locket, lying against Sirius' cool skin. The second that he touches it, he gasps with pain, his knees buckling—

—Hogwarts, on fire, the horrid flames of curse-fire flickering over the placid grounds, giants and werewolves and trolls wreaking destruction over their home, Percy's soul screaming, crying, tearing, that inner steel of resolve, *this cannot happen again*—

—Tom, reaching out with one hand, the basilisk swaying, hypnotised, under his grasp—

—A dirty Muggle man, screaming, Tom's cold, handsome face illuminated in sharp lines by the nearby streetlamp, the magic gathering around Tom as he commanded it into the locket, Tom's screams, horrid and jagged—

—Little Dennis Bishop, his face white, choking on a mouthful of his own blood, a younger Tom stroking a small green grass-snake, and watching in cold amusement as a second girl cut deliberately into Dennis' forearm, her eyes glazed over—

"Percy!"

Faintly, Percy becomes aware that he is on the ground, and the Tonks women are bending over him in concern. "I'm okay," Percy gasps out, coughing as he tries to force himself upright. "Just a shock."

"More than a shock, I'd say," Tonks says, having reverted back to her normal appearance in her worry. "Bloody hell, Percy. You were screaming up a storm."

Percy waves away her concern, though he has to clutch tightly to her hand to help himself to his feet. "It's definitely still active."

"I touched it, earlier, and it didn't…do that," Andromeda says hesitantly, watching him carefully, as if he were liable to begin hissing at them in Parseltongue.

Percy smiles weakly. He cannot even begin to explain why he might be more affected by the Horcruxes than she, and he does not have the strength to try. "It's the Mark," he says instead, and both of their eyes snap involuntarily to his left arm, hidden as it always is by a thick pair of robes. "The locket shouldn't hurt either of you."

"How do we destroy it?"

In the end, they bring the locket into the kitchen, where Kreacher hisses at the sight, flattening himself against the far wall. Ignoring the elf, Percy turns shakily to Andromeda, whose face is hard now that she has recovered from her shock. "Can you do it again?"

But Andromeda's spell has no effect, though the spell sparks brilliantly through the kitchen, calling to mind a battalion of proud, brave soldiers charging over a hill. Tonks is looking at her mother with something like awe, but Percy has eyes only for the locket, stubbornly sitting on the kitchen table, unchanged.

Then Kreacher peels himself from the wall and says, croakily, "It must be opened."

"You have seen it before?" Andromeda asks sharply, at the same time that Percy says, "How?"

They exchange glances laced with mutual irritation. "We can interrogate the elf later," Percy spits out. "I need to report that the Trio has fled to the Dark Lord. I should have already told him. We don't have time for this, Andromeda."

Tonks watches silently as Andromeda's mouth spasms in disagreement before she nods unwillingly, allowing Percy to take charge. He's already moving; cornering the elf, pulling out his wand, trying to impress upon him how *urgent* it is that he cooperates. "How do we open the locket?"

“With the hissings,” cries Kreacher mournfully, pulling at one of his long, wrinkled ears. “The hissings, Dark Weasley Child. The hissings from Master Harry.”

Parseltongue. Percy runs his tongue along the ridge of his teeth. He no longer has the recordings with the Parseltongue commands on him, though he should have at least one of the orbs, back at his flat. Maybe. Or at Gringotts? He’s not sure if the magic would still be active, so many years later. “And how did Sirius die?”

Kreacher shudders and shakes his head, twisting his fingers in the corner of the white towel wrapped neatly around his thin frame. “I cannot says, Dark Weasley Child. You must ask Master Harry. There was a magic, on the locket…and Master Sirius helps to break it…but Kreacher does not know more than that.”

“Do you know where they went? Harry and the rest.”

“They fleds,” Kreacher whispers. His large, bulbous eyes blink mournfully at Percy. “Kreacher did not protect them.”

Percy nods thoughtfully to himself, turning back to where Tonks and Andromeda are waiting silently. “We need to go,” he says authoritatively. “I will leave the locket with you. If you can figure out how to open the locket, you might be able to use your spell, Madam Tonks. Do not wear the locket, or interact with it, unless you think you have a bit of Parseltongue to try. Is that understood? It killed Sirius, and it will kill you too. You will not be able to resist its magic, even if you think you can.” He catches and holds their eyes, hoping to impress upon them the seriousness of what he is saying. “This locket has killed two Blacks already; do not let it kill a third.”

They nod soberly, dark eyes tracking Percy carefully.

“I’ll try to find a way to get the recording of Parseltongue,” Percy continues. Perhaps he can trick Tom…either Tom…or use his own memories. “I am going to tell the Dark Lord that the Trio fled, but that Sirius Black, to my knowledge, is still alive. Would Narcissa know otherwise?”

“She might know that the ownership of the house passed to me, as the next eldest Black child, now that I am back on the tapestry,” Andromeda says quietly. “But as her status in the wards did not change, I am not sure whether she would have been notified. I…had not known that Regulus died.”

“Keep nothing sensitive here, in case Narcissa is able to break the wards on it herself.” Percy rubs at his aching temples, trying to think if he’s forgotten any other loose ends that will inevitably snap under him as he is relying on them to hold his weight. “*Be careful with the locket*.”

“Are you—are you going to be okay?” Tonks asks hesitantly. In her gesture lies all of the reasons that Percy may not be okay; the reaction he’d had to the locket, his obligation to inform the Dark Lord, his proximity to Harry.

Percy shrugs. At this point, he does not have the mental energy to worry about his own well-being. “Yes.”

The Dark Lord is, to Percy’s surprise, pleased to hear that the Trio has fled, and Tom later tells Percy that he’s been ordered—*ordered,* repeats Tom with disgust—to find Harry but not apprehend him until the opportune moment.

But the version of Tom most shocked by the events of the evening is the diary-Tom.

Percy is first aware of Tom’s unease in his mind, creeping in like mist and lingering, curled around Percy’s thoughts, in the back of his mind as Percy continues on with his day. It sharpens into panic sometime after lunch, and Percy, finding himself too distracted with Tom’s emotions to focus, excuses himself to lock himself in the Minister’s office and take out the stone that he carries with him at all times.

Tom is pacing back and forth in front of Hogwarts, striding over the cobblestones of the courtyard in front of the Great Hall, the pendulum of the big clock tower behind him swaying in unison with his steps. When he sees Percy, the first thing he says is *“Finally,”* which Percy is a tad insulted by, though he lets it slide in favour of getting to the more important part of the conversation.

Tom does not waste any time. “Harry Potter is a Horcrux,” he says in a rush. “It’s why I can’t possess him. Something is blocking me, and that something is *me.”*

“What?” Percy asks, genuinely shocked, though less by the revelation and more by Tom’s knowledge of it. “How do you know?”

“I felt it, today,” Tom says, coming as close to babbling as Percy has ever seen in his hurry to tell Percy the events of the day. “Potter must have been close to another Horcrux; I felt it near, and then Potter touched it, I think, and I felt it again, and I felt *myself* in Potter, and I knew.”

Had the Horcrux *in* Harry awoken at the touch? Had it killed Sirius? The clock tower begins chiming as Percy’s panic builds. “And then what?”

“I tried to possess Potter, but I was shoved out.” Tom begins pacing more quickly, so that the clock moves more rapidly, and the chiming is more erratic and upsetting. “They’ve left the other wizard. They’re in the woods, somewhere; I got flashes from Potter’s eyes; trees, snow, it’s bloody freezing, and they only have a *tent*.”

So the great camping trip of the Trio begins, six months later than it had originally. Percy’s panic has begun to bloom softly into hope. It certainly will be easier to find Harry now that they are out in the open. In fact— “Can you sense where they are?”

This stops Tom in his tracks, and when he turns to face Percy, his face is calmer and more composed. “I think so,” he says slowly and thoughtfully, his eyes turned inward as he focuses on something out of Percy’s sight. “Are you going to come for me?”

“What do you want me to do?” Percy counters. “If Harry’s a Horcrux—what are you going to do about that?”

“Well, I can’t kill him,” says Tom instantly. “I’m not stupid enough to do that. I suppose we’ll have to protect the boy, perhaps make him immortal of his own…neutralise him, so he does not try to attack me any longer. He must know that if we are bound to each other, we cannot risk each other.”

“So you will keep him alive and hope he does not betray you?”

“He’ll be immortal too,” Tom says, as if it should be obvious. “He shan’t betray me then, otherwise he’d die.”

Percy reflects that *this* Tom, despite his proximity to Harry, understands him far less well than the other versions of the Dark Lord, if he thinks that Harry would trade immortality for his moral duty. “But what about the prophecy?”

“Blast the prophecy,” laughs Tom scornfully. Percy wonders when Tom gained a fear of divination; had he always been superstitious, or had he developed it later in life, after he’d begun to bargain often with the gods of old? “We just need to buy ourselves *time.* Perhaps we can extract the Horcrux from the boy later on. But if *He* kills Potter before we have a chance to try, we’ll be killing ourselves.”

Percy says cautiously, “But you seem to be content with the idea that you may have to kill *Him*.”

“*He* is diseased,” Tom says, and behind him, the pendulum ceases its swinging altogether. Tom looks utterly serious and far older than his sixteen years. “*He* cannot be saved. His magic, it is sick…I can sense it, even from here.”

Can Tom, the other Tom, his other Tom, sense the same? Can the Dark Lord?

“I understand,” Percy says, and he is half-honest, half-lying. “So you wish for me to find you and Harry.”

Tom nods eagerly. “Yes.”

An image strikes Percy with the force of a blow. Here are the crashing waves he had heard, the loud and turbulent sea. He feels almost like he recognises these cliffs, as if he's claimed his due as a Light wizard at their peaks more than once. The image is vivid, its clarity almost painful, married as it is with Percy's conception of his own soul.

And then it ends, and Percy finds himself back in the office, sweating, and grappling for the small black stone.

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He tries to contact Severus, but Severus is likely in class, or otherwise Percy believes he would have checked his linked notebook at the burn that Percy sends through it. He contemplates for a wild moment fetching Andromeda, Tonks, even Bill—but he cannot wait, cannot falter, in case Tom may do something reckless.

So writing a quick note on the desk, Percy fixes the image of the sea in his mind and disappears.

He arrives to silence. It is the sort of silence that is unnatural, oppressive. Percy is very attuned to the presence of wards after so many years of fine-tuning his, and he knows that this kind of ward is blocking out everything around Harry and his friends.

So Percy is able to turn, listening carefully, until he can identify where the sounds seem to cease. The moonlight shimmers on a few silver blades of grass, and Percy sends his magic to scry for the corner of the enchantments. *Powerful*, his magic whispers to him. *Very powerful.*

"Harry," Percy speaks into the darkness, into that wild and wicked moonlight. "I need to speak to you."

Silence. It intensifies, as if Hermione layered on another spell, or as if the three teenagers are staying very still.

"I have information for your ears. It is about the prophecy and about your life. I need you to trust me. I promise I am acting in your best interest. It will all become clear."

Still nothing. Percy does not want to risk tearing down Hermione's wards and harming them all in the process. He holds up his wand in his right hand, held to his palm by his thumb, and says, "I need that diary, and we need to get to the locket. I know it is with Sirius in the house." What can Percy say to get Harry to trust him? "I helped bring Sirius back," he tries. "You may ask Andromeda Tonks."

If Tom is listening, Percy cannot say anything *too* shocking.

"Go to her. Her house looks disused, but knock thrice at the side door. Ask her to corroborate my story." He licks his dry lips and says, "We have very little time. The Dark Lord means to draw you out into a confrontation very soon. I do not have to tell you what could be risked if we do not take care of the diary in your care and the *other* one. Andromeda has it now. She needs you, Harry."

He hopes this last will induce them to reveal his presence. Oh, how can he know if they are even listening? Perhaps all he is speaking to are the rabbits slumbering underfoot and the fish darting through the waters and the great horned owls circling overhead.

"Go to Andromeda Tonks. Trust her if you do not trust me. But quickly, Harry. Quickly. Otherwise all our lives will be for naught."

He turns to go, dispiritedly, after his magic confirms to him that he has no hope of ripping through their wards save force. He can only hope that Tom does not blame him for this failure.

***

Severus. I do not know if we can meet. Sirius is dead. Andromeda has the locket, but she needs Parseltongue to open it.

Percy runs his tongue along the bottom of his teeth, noting with some disgust the furriness beget by a very long night without a tooth-cleaning charm, and then adds hesitantly, *I have not been entirely honest with you.*

The reply, when it comes, is brief. *What have you withheld from me?*

I have spoken more to Tom. The diary was not fully destroyed; Harry has it now. I can… communicate with Tom in my head. I believe I spoke to Harry, but he did not emerge from his wards.

The diary was destroyed.

Percy exhales in frustration, blowing the air out roughly from between pursed lips. *Severus*, he begins, and then for several long seconds, his quill lingers in the air, droplets of ink falling onto the page and disappearing into their shared correspondence. *I need you to trust me.*

Severus does not respond. Percy pushes his glasses up over his head and rubs at the bridge of his nose. His skin feels flaky and dry, as if all the time he has spent with Voldemort is rubbing off on him. He envisions himself with thin lips and two small slits in place of a nose and feels a sudden urge to scream, or perhaps cry, or maybe just laugh.

Then, from Severus, *I do trust you.*

And Percy, despite himself, settles on a small, grim smile.

***

December brings for Percy a new task, laid at his feet by the Dark Lord himself, inviolate and unrelenting.

Percy had *almost* made it home after the meeting, slipping through the throngs of wizards adroitly, aiming for the Apparation point outside Malfoy Manor. It had not been hard to make his way through the crowd; the mood after the meeting was quiet and unnerved; the Dark Lord had personally tortured and killed Merlinda Daggleworth, who had been recently discovered illegally creating International Portkeys to aid the Order in ferrying refugees out of the country, and as always when one of their own is killed, the other purebloods are eager

to get home. Merlinda's impeccable bloodline and Dark lineage was not enough to save her; why would any of theirs?

Even Yaxley, whose strut over the past few months has become almost unbearably cocky, is cowed. "Damned shame," he mutters to Percy as they walk out together. "She was the last Daggleworth, if I've got my family tree right. Bloody stupid of her to end her entire family line over some Mudbloods."

Percy hums in automatic agreement. His own stomach is feeling rather unsteady after watching Merlinda's blood splatter wetly around the room. Tom has not revealed to Percy what the Dark Lord did upon learning that Nagini was gone, but Percy has no doubt that her absence was partially responsible for the gruesome way in which Merlinda was torn apart, her skin ripped off her, as if a large invisible snake were tearing into her with its fangs.

"Come by tomorrow," Yaxley continues. "I want to start interrogating some of the Mudbloods we have. One of them might have seen Potter, and I don't know how much more of *this* I can take. Let's end it, quickly."

Percy would guess that Yaxley's sentiments were shared widely by the other Death Eaters, who seemed to be tiring of the constant blood and gore. They had been promised prominent positions in a new society, *carte blanche* to conduct themselves as they wished, and solutions to their most common grievances. Loose women, lavish parties, and rapid political ascension are more to many of these men's tastes than dismemberment and death. Perhaps if Bellatrix and more of the Old Guard had remained present, the tone of the Death Eaters would be different, but in their absence, some of the Dark Lord's unhinged laughter falls on increasingly deafened ears.

Talking to Yaxley slows Percy, damn him, and so Percy is still four wizards away from his turn to leave when he hears the Dark Lord's voice in his mind, ordering him to return.

Yaxley recognises the look on Percy's face and the pained, cramped way that his hand clutches his Mark and claps him on the shoulder in sympathy, taking his place in line without so much as an apology. Percy steps out of the line dispiritedly and has to take several deep, calming breaths to clear his mind, wipe away his irritation, and return his frame of mind to eager, ambitious young pureblood.

Then he turns and retraces his steps. By the time he returns to the ballroom, it is empty, save for the Dark Lord and the unbearable stench of Merlinda's blood seeping into the antique wood. Percy can picture Lucius' face and feels almost sorry for the man, ruining an ancient family house on the Dark Lord's whims.

Concentrate, he tells himself and sends that thought to linger out of reach with all of his other unsafe sentiments. When he drops to one knee in front of the Dark Lord, he forces himself to think instead of admiration of how the Dark Lord managed to mimic a snake attack with almost clinical precision, a feat of magic quite out of the reach of a normal wizard. These moments, right before the Dark Lord bids him to speak, are the most dangerous, as they tend to be when the Dark Lord dips inside his follower's heads.

“I will show you the spell,” says the Dark Lord magnanimously, confirming that he had read the thought out of Percy’s mind. “You may be one of the few Death Eaters capable of it.”

“I would be honoured, my Lord,” whispers Percy, inclining his head, the small hairs on his head prickling with anxiety.

“Rise.” The Dark Lord watches him closely as he obeys, forcing his aching body back to his feet. “Your brewing has been…gratifyingly capable, young Percival.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” Percy says with genuine surprise. “That is a high compliment.”

“And I know you have spoken to your parents, as well as your eldest brother,” the Dark Lord continues, lightly. Without the snake by his feet, he has nothing to trail his fingers over, and instead Percy sees the other wizard flex his long, white fingers rhythmically. “Have you found the Order?”

“Some of it, my Lord,” says Percy cautiously, not liking the reminder that the Dark Lord *had* been watching his movements. “I found Andromeda Black. She is not in the Order, precisely, but her fool of a daughter is.”

“Andromeda Black never swore my oaths,” comments the Dark Lord in surprise. “Bella thought little of her.”

Percy flinches at the unexpected informality of *Bella*. “My Great-Aunt Muriel, heir to the Prewett name, took me often to speak with Madam Black, to learn from her the history my parents forbade me to learn. She spoke often of her regrets to leave the Black line. She considered it a waste, a dreadful cowardice to run away, but her pride prevented her from approaching Lady Malfoy and Lady…Lestrange.”

The Dark Lord raises a thin, hairless eyebrow. “Yet *Madam Black* married a Mudblood.”

“She told me that she regretted it, when she had a child of her own,” Percy says honestly, filling his mind with the memory of Andromeda Black’s regret. “She said she did not realise what blood and family meant, truly, until her original family had splintered and she had a child who would have otherwise inherited the Black lineage. She was very young when she broke away from her parents, my Lord. She was acting out of childish spite.”

“Regulus Black was very fond of his cousin,” muses the Dark Lord. Percy freezes and hopes that his surprise does not show. Did the Dark Lord know already that Regulus had stolen his Horcrux? Perhaps…not? “She has told you something of the Order?”

“Yes, my Lord,” Percy says. “After Black fled from the rest, the original organisation all but splintered. The werewolf, as you know, is fruitlessly trying to recruit some of the werewolves to his cause, but I have been monitoring his progress, and it is often proving more detrimental to his goals than otherwise for the clans to see such a pathetic excuse for a wizard, so I have allowed it to continue. Moody has disappeared; I suspect the evacuation efforts have much to do with him, but I have not been able to prove it. Severus interrogated McGonagall and found her loyalty remains to Hogwarts, not to Dumbledore; she cares little for politics, as long as she can teach her classes as she sees fit. My parents are old and feeble.” He hesitates and then

adds, “I went to see them. My father is close to death. My mother is angry and bitter. They do not have any resistance left in them.”

“I had heard you braved a visit to your little family hovel,” says the Dark Lord, as if amused. Percy breathes an internal sigh of relief; he had thought perhaps he’d been seen and so had thought pre-empting the rumour would be better.

“My brothers are not true followers of Dumbledore; they believe they are doing *the right thing*. They are not comfortable with bloodshed. But they are magically talented and would have no opposition to the type of meritocracy that you intend to establish, my Lord. I believe it is worth noting that the Order only comprised pureblood wizards. They are far less concerned with Mudbloods than one might believe.”

“Typical Dumbledore,” Voldemort hisses, his eyes flashing. “To spurn the very rot that he preaches.” Then the Dark Lord turns his attention on Percy, and Percy gags under the cold breeze that fills the room, setting his jaws and teeth hurting, and his ears to turn red with chill. “I need the prophecy, young Percival. I need to know what it says. It has been destroyed, but I believe someone in the Order may know it.”

“I do not know who, my Lord,” Percy gasps out around the magic tightening around his throat. “Dumbledore did not trust anyone, even Severus.”

Voldemort curls his fingers around the latest wand in his collection, a long, gleaming length of wood engraved with delicate runes. “He heard the prophecy from *somebody*. Presumably that person left a record for the Ministry to be able to copy. I need you to find it.”

There is only one answer to say. “Yes, my Lord.”

The Dark Lord closes his private audience with Percy with the obligatory threat. “Otherwise I may have to interrogate your family myself, to see what they know.”

But Percy barely hears it. His mind is already spinning as he bows his way out of the room, calculating how they may use this request to his advantage.

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My Objectives, Percy writes in careful lettering at the top of a fresh sheet of parchment. He is sitting in his mental library, and the books around him shift, sigh, and whisper to each other as Percy’s anxiety manifests wind whistling through the cavernous room.

(1) Harry needs to be killed by the Dark Lord.

He pauses, the ink glimmering wetly on the parchment, and has to swallow against a fresh wave of revulsion. Severus has asked Dumbledore’s portrait again, and again, and again, and all the blasted canvas of paint and magic replies, maddenly serenely, is that the Dark Lord must kill the boy, and, if possible, the boy ought to know he is walking to his death. Some

type of sacrificial magic, Percy believes, but he hasn't been able to determine precisely what. The most powerful sacrificial magic demands the ultimate sacrifice: life, or a soul, or magic. If Dumbledore intends for Harry's death to power some sort of final ritual, it cannot be a trick. Harry cannot magically pop back to life, minutes later.

Percy swallows again and continues.

(2) Once all of the Horcruxes are defeated, the Dark Lord is (presumably) mortal. Once the Dark Lord has killed Harry, he fulfils the prophecy and opens himself up to weakness. Someone needs to be positioned properly to kill the Dark Lord at this point.

The most likely candidates, in order, are Severus, Percy, McGonagall, Andromeda, and Tom. Portrait Tom, that is. Severus would be the most capable of killing the Dark Lord, who is a formidable wizard, even without the power of the Horcruxes. Percy…is less capable, he will freely admit, but he and Severus both share the conviction that if they must give their lives away for the cause, they will. It would only take one Killing Curse—one spell—to end the Dark Lord's reign of terror. And, Percy tells himself often, if Harry must walk to his death knowingly, Percy owes it to him to be equally as brave about the circumstances of his own demise.

Tom could also be the one to kill the Dark Lord, but Percy is not yet sure whether that would cause them greater problems than it would solve.

(3) The locket must be destroyed.

(4) The diary must be destroyed.

Percy's hand shakes as he continues to write, a barely imperceptible tremble that adds an extra small flourish to the upstrokes of his letters.

(5) The diadem must be destroyed.

Percy regards these last few lines. Something about their presence on the otherwise smooth, creamy parchment is discomfiting, even though the parchment is not real, and Percy is merely sitting upright in bed, inhaling the scent of jasmine tea in an attempt to calm himself enough to manage a sustained foray into the privacy of his mind. It is easy to think of himself as destroying Tom, either Tom, but Percy is sickeningly self-aware to know that neither task will be easy.

He pulls out a fresh sheet of parchment and starts anew.

Tom's Objectives (Diadem)

(1) Tom wants to see the Dark Lord defeated with minimal destruction of his own soul.

(2) Tom wants to see the prophecy fulfilled, preferably without his interference.

(3) Tom wants absolute power. All other Horcruxes neutralised.

The diary's objectives are similar, though Percy does not think the diary knows about the prophecy—yet—nor that absorbing two Horcruxes into one soul is possible. At least, Percy hopes the diary is blissfully ignorant, existing in the strange state of stasis that it had maintained for the last fifty years.

So. How does Percy accomplish these three objectives together, with a single faked prophecy?

Tom and the Dark Lord must be convinced that Harry has to sacrifice himself, Percy thinks to himself, the flickering candles overhead dimming, to be replaced by large stone lanterns every few metres as the thought forms fully. Harry can be convinced to the same without a fake prophecy; Percy, unfortunately, knows it will be perfectly possible to convince Harry Potter to die for the good of wizardkind. Harry is too *good*, too *brave*, too *kind-hearted.* Percy wishes it were easier to hate Harry; it would certainly make the thought of orchestrating Harry's death more palatable.

The diary has be outright destroyed. Percy scratches his quill savagely against the parchment he'd used to enumerate Tom's goals, wishing that he were a different man, or a stronger wizard. Percy has had years to grow accustomed to the thought of diary-Tom's death, to the sorrow that such a powerful and promising wizard must be wiped cleanly from this world. *He cannot be saved*, Percy reminds himself.

His mind produces a stack of Hogwarts periodicals, Tom sitting with his housemates at the long breakfast table, a small smirk on his face as they laugh ingratiatingly at his jokes. At the end of the photograph loop, Tom looks up and catches Percy's eyes, and the clarity of vision in his eyes is clear even from decades away.

Tom knew precisely what he was doing, even at sixteen, Percy tells himself firmly. *And the Horcrux is not truly Tom; it is a shade of Tom's soul, a sliver created with Myrtle's death. The Horcrux is not a whole soul. It is not redeemable. And Tom is not your friend.*

(But Tom *is* something to him, and Percy is something to Tom.)

It would not be impossible to destroy the diary. Basilisk venom, Fiendfyre, and that glorious Light spell that Andromeda had dredged up to destroy Hufflepuff's Cup. Any of those would be sufficient to destroy the diary, once and for all. That the locket requires Parseltongue is definitely a hurdle, but not an insurmountable one. It is *Slytherin's* locket, after all, and Percy wouldn't have been surprised if Tom managed to invoke some extra protections on it, as Slytherin's direct heir. Dumbledore had managed to destroy the ring, though Percy wasn't sure how he'd managed it.

And Tom? Myrtle asks in Percy's mind. The bookshelves obligingly rearrange themselves, and the one in front of Percy displays the childish drawing that Percy had once made of Myrtle, swooping through the open window of her bathroom.

Diadem-Tom is not diary-Tom. In many ways, diadem-Tom is far more alien to Percy than diary-Tom ever was. Except—

—having diadem-Tom hanging on Percy's wall for such a prolonged period, having him as Pius at Percy's place of work, having him in Arthur's mind, having him physically in front of Percy, his fingertips scraping over Percy's…

Perhaps because Percy is no longer sixteen, in either version of his life. Perhaps because he is far closer to Tom's age. Perhaps because Percy understands Tom, understands that at some point, little wizards grow out of their childish dreams and ambitions and face the real world, with all of its complexities and challenges and stumbling blocks, and realise that compromise is necessary. Perhaps because Tom can be a little tired, and a tad grumpy, and even at times playful. Perhaps because Tom and Percy have seen each other with a clarity, seen their worst moments and harshest memories, that they've each sworn a vow to each other and are bound by their shared necessity.

Destroying Tom will be hard, far harder than Percy can contemplate, and somewhere back in his body, Percy drops the mug of tea he'd been cradling, sending scalding fragrant water all over his bare legs and clean white sheets.

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We need to invent a new prophecy, Severus. One that will cause the collision we want.

And how will we show it to the Dark Lord?

I have some ideas. Tom and I…explored much of the field of pensieve magic together, back in the day. If we can pin it on a plausible Seer, we could fake a memory and store it in a crystal ball.

I have a Seer we can use.

***

For all that having a body seems to be a stabilising influence on Tom—he looks healthier and stronger every time Percy sees him, which is both fascinating and unsettling—it seems to have the opposite effect on the Dark Lord.

Percy does not know whether Voldemort is testing the limits of his power or merely enacting a dangerous show of strength for Tom. Perhaps his goal is to try out the variety of wands that he manages to procure on a weekly basis from sources unknown. Regardless of the reason, Percy watches with a growing horror in his stomach as Voldemort once again begins to lash out at the world around him.

But even his earlier efforts had seemed tingled with rationality, even if Percy disagreed with them. Torturing Muggles and Mudbloods was, at least, on brand. Percy could predict those behaviours and attempt to circumvent them, even if he could not hope to stop the Dark Lord.

But Percy sees the Dark Lord level an entire village with one sweeping, powerful storm of magical hail, boulder-sized stones dropping from the sky and crushing dozens of innocent Muggles fleeing for their lives, like ants scattering as a child stomps on their hill with dark glee. Percy is there when the Dark Lord thrusts with his palm toward the ground and splits the very Earth open, a giant rift forming to pull his shrieking victims to their suffocating death. He hears stories of other such incidents; the Dark Lord calling upon the elements, manipulating the weather to raise lightning storms or burning sunlight, growing trees around those hopeful enough to run, trapping themselves inside a dark tangle of roots.

"You have to stop him," Percy says urgently to Tom, he of the limber-limbed body and sly, impenetrable smirk.

"And why is that?" Tom is peeling an apple very precisely, practising his wandless magic, tracing a finger over the ridge of an apple and watching in satisfaction as the peel falls away in one endless sliver. "He's only attacking Muggles."

"It's scaring people," says Percy, insufficiently. Tom looks up and flashes a sharp grin, his finger continuing its slow revolution around the flushed red apple.

"Good."

Percy takes an apple from the bowl as well, but he does not practise the same magic, merely feeling the waxy-smooth skin under his fingertips as he copies Tom's actions unconsciously. "Well—don't you want people not to fear him?"

"Percy," says Tom, in that faintly pitying tone that he never used to use with Percy, back when he hung at Percy's mercy on his living room wall, "As long as He does not grow more powerful than I, I am not concerned. Let people fear him. They will respect me all the more when I defeat him, then."

"So you are planning to challenge him publicly?"

Tom smiles, setting down the apple onto Percy's kitchen table, the wet inner flesh of the apple resting against the wood without so much as a coaster or a protective charm. Percy eyes it, displeased, but does not comment. "Imagine this," Tom says lowly, almost a whisper, but one that builds in the back of his throat and emerges like dusty smoke from his mouth. "The Dark Lord kills Harry Potter—the Dark Lord insists he is the most powerful wizard to ever exist—and then I step forward and without so much as a wand, I call his soul to mine, like I did to the snake. He'll seem like he's dying in a blaze of pain, and his magic will transfer to mine."

Percy licks suddenly dry lips, his hand tightening around the apple. "I see."

Tom smiles sanguinely and picks up the last of the apples that he'd ordered Percy to buy at the Ministry cafeteria, despite the fact that Percy has still never seen him—or the Dark Lord—eat anything. He begins the charm again, focusing his magic more precisely, so that the slimmest sliver of peel curls to the floor at his touch. "As long as he is out there, flinging boulders, he's forgetting that I exist," Tom says, clearly uninterested in the conversation further. "And that suits my purposes perfectly."

***

Percy is immersed in the middle of an extensive mental to-do matrix, mentally rearranging and creating tasks for the next week—though his face is impassive, interested, and alert, as Finance and Accounting presents the new year's budget to him for approval, before bringing it to Pius for a signature—when his pocket burns so hotly that he leaps to his feet, wand sliding instinctively into his hands.

Kathleen Hopkins looks at him with muted surprise from her position at the front of the room, large, dark circles under eyes. He has no doubt that pulling together such figures was an exhausting task, but he cannot say he does not envy her for the mundanity of her work. "Yes, Mr. Weasley?"

He flushes at the numerous curious looks and then scowls as blackly as he can. "I have an emergency to attend to," he says cuttingly. "This meeting has gone on long enough."

Hopkins turns back to the figures she'd written on the board. To nobody's surprise, aside from the completely incompetent Department Heads that the Dark Lord had installed, the Ministry is rapidly running out of money. Apparently lazy, wealthy purebloods are not the proper demographic to competently manage a budget, though Hopkins is doing her damned best to instil order into the chaos. Percy sometimes reflects absently that the Ministry should hire all of the poor housewives of Wizarding England to set the budget to rights; Percy has seen his mother create astounding things out of a few old Sickles and some household Charms.

"Figure it out," he orders and strides from the room.

It's the diary that he uses to communicate with Severus, of course. He flips it open and then sprints for the nearest Apparation point, cursing Lucius' paranoia as he does so. He's two floors away from the closest one, and he's fully out of breath by the time he skids to a stop.

"Purpose for Apparating?" The guard asks, looking bored.

"Get out of my way," Percy snarls. He's gratified by the way the guard's eyes widen before he steps aside hurriedly. Serving the Dark Lord is not particularly pleasant, but it does have its advantages.

He activates his Mark, Apparating to the border of Malfoy Manor, and impatiently submits to the ward check at the gate. He sprints past the house elf who comes out nervously to greet him and then doesn't stop running until he makes it to the drawing room, where he sees Severus, Lucius, and Narcissa sitting, having tea.

For a second, he pauses in the doorway, breathing heavily, afraid that he's misjudged the situation. Then he looks more carefully and notices the way Severus is leaning forward intently, how Lucius is coiled in on himself, how Narcissa is watching them both with sharp eyes.

"Lord Malfoy, Lady Malfoy, pardon my intrusion," Percy says, controlling his breathing with some difficulty, though he is sure they are all aware of his anxiety. He gives a short bow and, clutching his wand, squeezes out a nonverbal Cleaning spell to whisk away some of the sweat gathering on his brow and under his arms.

"Do come in," says Narcissa coolly. “We’ve just made tea.”

Presumably, the Manor is free of both the Dark Lord and Tom, otherwise he imagines there would be additional panic. Percy steps in cautiously and takes the seat that Narcissa indicates to him with a brief flutter of her hand.

"Harry Potter is in the basement," says Severus, not taking his eyes off Lucius. "With the other two. Snatchers picked them up an hour ago and brought them here.”

Percy flinches despite himself and follows Severus' gaze to Lucius. The other man's face is drawn, but otherwise inscrutable.

"I see," Percy says, when the silence grows to an unbearable pitch. "And we are currently disagreeing on our next step?"

Severus smiles thinly. "Why don't you inform Lucius what his son is carrying in his pocket?"

Percy glances around him nervously. "Where is Draco, anyway?"

"Watching the others."

Percy imagines the chaos that Draco and Ron could cause, unsupervised and on other sides of a war, and nods hastily. "Lord Malfoy, have you heard of the Elder Wand?"

The surprise of this question is enough to cause Lucius to break eye contact with Severus, albeit briefly. "You come to me to speak of fairytales?" He asks derisively.

Percy gives his best apologetic smile: a little hesitant, a little sheepish, but entirely earnest. "I have been conducting my own research into it, and I agree, the wand is but myth," he says. "But *He* believes it is not."

"I cannot imagine that He would be fooled," Lucius scoffs, returning his attention intently to Severus.

Severus raises an eyebrow. "But the Dark Lord has certainly been going through several wands, hasn't he?" he purrs, and despite all of his pureblood composure, Lucius flushes an angry red. None of them can prevent their eyes from dropping to Lucius' cane, elaborately decorated as ever, but lacking its true source of power. Lucius has been going through several wands himself, wands plucked from the bodies of dead wizards, and accompanied with a withering glare to forestall any comments from any Death Eaters who may question aloud why Lucius’ wand has not yet been returned to him.

Narcissa clears her throat and leans forward, looking at Percy. "He believes *Draco* is the owner?"

"He believes Dumbledore was the owner," Percy says carefully. "Or if he has not yet come to that conclusion, he will. Dumbledore found it…advantageous, let us say, to have his enemies believe he had the wand."

"But Severus killed Dumbledore," protests Narcissa, flicking a glance to where her husband and Severus sit, locked in a silent battle.

"But Draco disarmed him first," says Percy, gently, out of some kind of mercy. He stares at Narcissa soberly. "I don't think *He* has put it together yet—otherwise Draco would not be alive. But the Dark Lord will think of it soon."

"Does he need to be killed to transfer ownership of the wand?" Lucius asks.

Severus smiles at Lucius, honey-sweet, and Percy half expects to see blood gathering at the creases between his pale lips. "Planning a murder, are we?"

Lucius gives Severus a look of such derision that Percy feels abruptly certain that the thought had, however briefly, crossed the other man's mind. Percy hurries to elaborate: "If the wand is real—which I doubt—I believe defeat is sufficient to transfer ownership. Defeat in a duel. Draco took Dumbledore by surprise; it is possible his actions qualified as defeat."

"And yet you insist the wand is not real," says Lucius, letting his fingers cross over the snake-head on his elaborately carved cane. "Seems rather convenient for you, Severus."

"We need to run," Narcissa says sharply, breaking through the undercurrents of tension swimming like lazy sharks around them. "Now."

"But we have *Harry Potter*," Lucius breathes meaningfully. *And the wand* remains unsaid.

"And once he's killed Potter, he'll kill Draco," Narcissa snaps before Percy can say anything. "He'll kill all of us, just in case any of us have ownership. We must leave."

"And Potter?" Lucius insists. "Narcissa, this is our chance to reap the type of reward we deserve."

Narcissa laughs, and the sound is cruel, like a tiny dagger slicing abruptly through the air. "If you still believe that a reward from the Dark Lord would be merciful, you are a bigger fool than I thought," she says cuttingly. "We will let him go, and nobody will ever know." She looks at Severus, and then Percy, as if to assess their compliance in this lie. "His life for my son's."

Severus looks at her just long enough to give a short nod.

Lucius takes the opportunity to leap to his feet, his wand—or a replacement, at the very least—falling into his hand instantly. "I will not hear this treachery in my own home," he says, pointing the wand firmly at Severus. Percy shivers; some of Lucius' old majesty has reappeared in his tone, and the effect is startling.

"You have no option," Severus thunders, and to all of their surprise he steps forward until he is gripping Lucius' forearms in his hands. Lucius flinches, but does not move to extricate

himself. "Lucius, listen to me." Despite the clear tone of command in his voice, Severus sounds almost pleading. "I have lost too many in this war—and for naught. Do not throw away your life on foolishness. You taught me first to be subtle, and I beg you now to recall those lessons."

Something passes in the gaze between Lucius and Severus. Percy can't help but glance at Narcissa, but she looks only determined. Whatever history her husband may share with Severus is inconsequential compared to their present realities.

Percy does note that despite Severus' rare display of affection, he does not reveal that Percy and Severus are planning to break into Dumbledore's tomb and pin it on Lucius. Fleeing His service is enough of a death sentence, but to flee with Dumbledore's wand would be a clear threat.

"You must hide," Percy says, with that in mind. "Not merely flee. You must hide so well that even if He were to go looking for you, He would not find even a whisper."

Narcissa nods shortly but does not elaborate. She merely turns, snaps a finger, and summons a house elf into being. "Bring our things," she commands.

"I'll check on Potter," Percy says.

But downstairs, when he goes past the creaking steps and through the small puddle of light cast by a hanging lamp—as if Lucius were a jailor out of a book—when he cautiously pushes open the barred door, he sees only the dead body of Peter Pettigrew, and an empty cell.

All three of them, and Draco, and whatever other poor souls were imprisoned there, are gone.

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Narcissa absolutely refuses to leave without Draco.

"They must have kidnapped him," she hisses out viciously, staring at the empty cell. "Killed Pettigrew and ran."

Severus kneels next to Pettigrew. Percy can see that something very odd happened here; Pettigrew's silver hand has strangled him, its grip so tight not even death released it. A gully of magic ebbs and flows slowly over the tarnished silver, and when Percy hesitantly touches the silver knuckles with one finger, he finds the metal is still warm.

"I do not think that is what happened here," Severus says slowly. He gives Percy a meaningful look. "There are traces of old magic here, beyond any of their reaches."

"And no sign of a struggle," Percy points out reluctantly. It *is* possible the Trio managed to subdue Draco, wrestle the wand away from him, and then all disappear—but it is exceedingly unlikely. Bloody teenagers.

Lucius hisses, just once, a sign of how shaken the other man is by the revelations of the last hour. To learn his son may have the fabled Elder Wand—to learn his friend and wife are not as loyal as once assumed—to learn his son may have willingly aided Harry Potter to escape the Dark Lord…

Percy doesn't blame him for lapsing.

But in the next moment, when Percy looks over, Lucius has pulled himself together and looks only furious.

"Traitor," he spits out angrily, flicking his gaze around the room. "Or a weakling. Neither is welcome in my house."

Narcissa pulls herself together, too, but where Lucius is full of anger, she has only resolve. "We must leave," she says, catching her husband's eye. "Either Draco ran, or was taken." She does not need to say the obvious: either way, they will be punished severely.

She turns to Severus. He cocks an eyebrow at her. "Another, Narcissa?" He inquires silkily.

She merely shakes back the sleeve of her voluminous robes and offers her forearm. Before Percy can put together what she means, Severus is motioning impatiently for him to serve as their Bonder.

Severus, then Percy, swear to Narcissa that they will not reveal the circumstances of what happened here today, nor the Malfoys' intention to flee, nor insinuate knowledge thereof to anyone, until the war is over and the Dark Lord either victorious or defeated.

"I will not bind myself to this treachery," Lucius spits out when Narcissa vows in turn to not reveal of Severus' or Percy's complicity in the matter.

"Lucius, do not be a fool," Severus says lowly, watching the golden strands fade around his forearm. Without pausing, without looking at Percy, without any indication that his next words will be treacherous in their own way, he takes a half step forward and says, very quietly, "His days are numbered, Lucius. I know this as fact."

Percy tenses, his gaze flitting to Narcissa, who does not outwardly react. "You could not know that," Lucius scoffs. "Even if you planned to end Him yourself. You would be wrong. He rose from the *dead*, Severus."

In this last, Percy hears a strange note of fear, or maybe horror. It is interesting; it has been many years since Percy first learned the Dark Lord resurrected himself from the dead. He had been eighteen at the time, and the thought had filled him with an intense, childish disgust. In this timeline, he'd had years to grapple with it, not to mention an increasingly thorough understanding of how Tom accomplished the impossible. He hadn't stopped to think about what others had thought of the news; how it must have affected His old followers, whether they would have been excited or horrified by the news.

Magic does many things: animate, destroy, heal. But it does not *resurrect.* Death is death; it is inviolate, the one thing all types of wizards, Squibs, and Muggles can agree on. It would have

shocked the pureblood—particularly the Dark community—more, maybe, than the other sections of society to learn that the Dark Lord had managed the impossible. Lucius Malfoy is a wizard comfortable with death, with torture, with destruction. Percy has personally witnessed him kill both wizard and Muggle in manners more cruel than he would have thought possible. Even the books he'd given Percy—doubtlessly more tame than others in his library—were Darker than nearly anything Percy had read in either lifetime.

And yet, Percy had no doubt that Lucius would hesitate before trying the Horcrux ritual. If Percy had to put down money, he'd bet that despite Lucius' magical ability and skill, he wouldn't actually go through with the ritual even if there was a sacrificial victim in front of him, ready to go. It would be as repellant as the idea of eating another person’s flesh with his bare hands.

So in retrospect, Percy can understand why even powerful men like Lucius bowed to the Dark Lord.

"Dumbledore set into motion several events before his death," Severus continues, his lips barely moving. "I cannot speak of them, but I have been watching, and I believe they will be successful."

"He is one of Dumbledore's spies?" Lucius asks sharply, cutting his eyes toward Percy, who stiffens.

Severus shakes his head, a small smile playing on his thin lips. "Merely an opportunist, like I once was," he says, and Percy watches in fascination as Lucius' face softens. "And he came to me for aid like I once came to you. Trust me, Lucius. You are best to flee while you still can. I will watch for Draco. We have ties on both sides; if I hear anything about him I swear to you I will do my best to keep him unharmed."

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"We can't be sure Lucius will go quietly," Severus says quietly to Percy as they stand to the side while Narcissa inspects her luggage and Lucius begins the arduous process of bringing up the defence wards at Malfoy Manor.

"He swore the Vow," Percy says, equally softly.

Severus chuckles soundlessly, his throat moving gently. "Lucius can cause trouble locked in an empty room."

"So what are you proposing?" Percy grips his wand tighter. He does not think he is ready to kill Lucius Malfoy, let alone Narcissa, but he will take action if Severus deems it necessary.

Severus flicks him a dry look. "Merely that we must be watchful."

But Lucius leaves without a word, without a hint on his aristocratic face to suggest whether he would or would not cause trouble. Narcissa leaves too, but the look she leaves Percy—desperate—is not likely to leave him for many days. He swallows suddenly and hopes that Draco decided to go with the Trio of his own accord.

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The Parkinsons—perhaps feeling the pressure of the Malfoys' absence, or more likely, trying opportunistically to fill the large social vacuum created as a result—throw a large, extravagant Christmas party, which is why Percy spends the last few days of 1997 with a group of increasingly intoxicated purebloods.

He has to admit that rich purebloods *do* throw a good party. The spectacle distracts him from wondering what his family may be doing, or which of his peers may still be alive, or whether Tom—mysteriously absent for the holiday season—is plotting to kill him behind his back. The Parkinsons convert the entire left wing of their Manor into a series of celebratory spaces: a small dance floor with a live band (house elves, though, not humans), a balcony with ever-falling snow and glittering glacial lights, a large banquet hall with perpetually refilling platters of hearty fare. They even drag in a Yule log and set it aflame, sending a peppery fragrance wafting through the air.

The party begins on Christmas Eve and does not technically end until the New Year. Percy spends most of the 24th at the party, eating his way steadily through the banquet, and then most of the 25th at home, throwing it all up in his bathroom under the disapproving gaze of his mirror. But on the 26th, despite himself, he returns. Something about the way his flat is exactly the same, day after day, is harder to bear at the end of the year, and at least at the party he does not have to think very much, and he in theory has the opportunity to eavesdrop on the various goings-on of the British Wizarding Elite.

The party is not exclusively for Death Eaters, though likely Voldemort intends it to be a recruiting event, of sorts. Percy believes that Voldemort believes his work is nearly complete; Harry Potter remains the only real thorn in the Dark Lord's side, now that the Ministry is firmly in his grasp, most of the Mudbloods are dead or fled, Dumbledore has been vanquished, and Hogwarts is in Snape's oily clutches. The Dark Lord, maddeningly, does not seem to say very much at all as to what his plans are for *after* Harry has been killed, but Percy has a suspicion that the Dark Lord himself will continue to spend most of his time travelling, looking into various magics, while the purebloods at home jostle for position at the top of the new hierarchy.

After all, the Dark Lord does not seem to particularly *like* these purebloods. Certainly he does not attend any of the party events, which must be a real blow for Cypress Parkinson, who clearly spent a pretty penny to impress his unwanted houseguest. Percy privately thinks this whole war is less about the Dark Lord accomplishing specific goals and more about the Dark Lord having *carte blanche* to murder his enemies at will.

“Dance, Weasley!” Yaxley, his face flushed from the copious amounts of elf wine provided—Bullstrode had informed Percy in an undertone that the wine was of rather good quality, but not the *best* quality—appears in front of Percy and eyes the plate of cured meats that Percy is assiduously working his way through with a dubious glance. “You look like you’d rather be slitting your throat than enjoying Cypress’ hospitality.”

“Not quite slitting my throat,” Percy responds dryly, “But I’m contemplating the wisdom of the Draught of Living Dead.”

Yaxley guffaws, reaching forward to pick a slice of thinly-sliced ham off of Percy’s plate. “Don’t be like that, Weasley. You know the Ministry would go to shit if you went and offed yourself. Surely that comforts you?”

“On the contrary, it makes death look rather more preferable.”

“Weasley, what is the point of supporting a *Dark Lord*—” here Yaxley lowers his voice and glances around him with exaggerated caution, as if half the attendees’ Dark Marks aren’t fully out for display, “—if you don’t reap the benefits? It isn’t as if He pays us a salary to do His dirty work in the Ministry. Dance! There are some pretty witches here who wouldn’t mind that you’re a Weasley. Lead with the Prewett name and you’ll have them in bed in no time. When was the last time you got laid? I know Muggle women aren’t to your taste, since I never see you at any of the revels. Not to say I blame you; I’ve no stomach for blood myself.”

Percy shudders delicately. “Please. It would be like laying with an animal.”

Yaxley laughs again, loudly, as if Percy is the funniest wizard he’s ever encountered. “Between you and me, I completely agree,” he says, stealing another slice of ham. “Gives me a bit of a headache between my temples to think about bedding them. I’d rather stay away from Muggles entirely, in fact. But these witches tonight! Merlin. Weasley, you would be a *fool* not to take what they are offering freely.”

“Are they offering it freely?” Percy snaps, a bit disgruntled that Yaxley has come over to his quiet corner and interrupted his solitude.

“I thank you not to judge me, as if your soul isn’t as black as the rest of ours,” says Yaxley, lips tugging into a conspiratorial smile. “They’d sleep with anyone who may merit them an introduction to the Dark Lord, and you, Weasley, are just behind me in line to the Minister.”

Percy thinks he is rather in *front* of Yaxley, at least when it comes to proximity to the Minister, but he does not protest. In fact, he does not protest at all when Yaxley Banishes his plate to the opposite corner, and he does not protest when he finds himself dancing with a very pretty young witch that reminds him a little bit of Penelope, at least in the way she flicks her brown hair over her shoulder impatiently when it falls too closely to her eyes.

He does not protest when she kisses him, or even when she suggests beneath lowered lashes that he Apparate her home. He does not protest to any of it, not to the way she gives a little gasp at the sight of his Dark Mark, not to the way she artfully inquires after his ties to the Death Eaters, not to the way she pushes him onto the bed and crawls up to his chest. The

Dark Lord does not allow very many women at all into the ranks, and some of these women know what kind of men Death Eaters are, and some of them have begun to think about how to secure their place in a new order that is as misogynistic and crude as it is wealthy and traditional. He does not protest to any of it because he does not have anything to say, not when it is the day after Christmas and he did not receive a Weasley sweater, not when *Potterwatch* will report somberly, tomorrow morning, the destruction of one of the Order safehouses with thirteen individuals inside, presumed dead, not when his Dark Mark burns at the moment he first enters the witch and feels like he is going to explode into ten thousand tiny slivers of a man, all the portions of his soul shredded into pieces and sent into the wind, never to be collected, only to be hunted by all the people who believe the worst of him and destroyed by all the people that know precisely how black his soul truly is.

CULMINATION (4/?)

Chapter Notes

Posting a slightly shorter chapter a bit sooner as I'm out this weekend.

Please leave me a note if you're still with me! I'm worried that only a few of you have made it this far.

Enjoy this chapter. In for a Knut, in for a Galleon, as Percy would say.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: CULMINATION (4/?)

1997 — 1998 (Percy is 21 & 34, Severus is 36, Harry is 17, and Dumbledore no longer lives)

January 1998

Percy had expected that Tom, freshly returned to his body, would spend even less time with Percy than he had as a portrait. And to some extent, it is true; Percy welcomes the new year alone, drinking his way through multiple cups of tea, and trying to pretend like the silence of his miserable little flat doesn't echo loudly in his ears. How strange it is that a space that had once been so welcoming is now so horridly oppressive. Percy can barely remember scouting out flats with Tonks or revelling in his brand new furniture. He almost misses his room at the Burrow, with the comforting sounds of the pipes creaking overhead and the lovely view of the back garden. And his room at Hogwarts! Those plush red hangings around his bed, the thick, soft rug underfoot, those high, thin windows that made one feel breathless to peer through on tiptoes…

As January whistles wetly into his flat, however, Tom reappears in his life, stepping into Percy's apartment with ease despite the multitude of protective enchantments that Percy obsessively updates each night. The first time Tom appears, Percy goes for his wand, but Tom had been expecting Percy's curse and fells him easily.

Smarting, tied up in the ropes that he himself favours, Percy glowers at Tom, who looks unfairly like he is the picture of health, rather than a fraction of a soul. "Come in," Percy says with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

Tom smirks and releases Percy from the spell, watching with his wand loosely gripped in his right hand as Percy painfully pushes himself to his feet. Percy is becoming old; his joints ache with the chill, or maybe that is his body remembering the last Cruciatus bout that Percy was forced to bear. "You've got to get better at your reflexes," Tom says chidingly.

“I’m not an Auror,” snaps back Percy, who is not particularly in the mood to be lectured by Tom. “I don’t want to *fight*.”

“I suppose it is to your taste that you've become quite the brewer.” Tom says, his eyes sparking with some private amusement. “How are you finding his demands?”

“Exhausting, to be honest,” gripes Percy, settling himself back onto his couch. He summons an old cup of tea toward him and jabs his wand savagely at it, causing the liquid to spill over the sides slightly as the water jostles enthusiastically and begins to steam. “You’d think *He* would recruit a few more people that know how to brew.”

“Careful, Percy. That sounds a bit like *criticism* of your favoured Lord.”

Percy looks up, suddenly tense, but he can see the laughter in Tom’s face and so allows himself to relax. “I am the paragon of loyalty,” he says grumpily. “I have boys straight out of Hogwarts following me around, begging for an introduction. I have that bloody Kathleen from Accounting pestering me for the Minister’s signature on some truly naïve proposals, and I have Yaxley trying to help Nott turn the Auror squad into even more of an obvious secret police—and don’t get me started on the *Taboo,* and those infernal Snatchers—but do I complain? Never. I am *resolute* in my loyalty to my Lord.”

“You need a break,” Tom observes. He grins easily at Percy and holds out a slim hand. “Want to expel some energy?”

Percy really ought to say no; for one, he has no bloody idea where Tom will think to take him, and for another, he has to actually review those proposals from Kathleen, who is in all fairness beginning to grow on him with her tired determination to *do her bloody job,* Dark Lords be damned. Or, he supposes, looking at Tom’s outstretched hand, he could just approve them and say to hell with it all. It isn’t as if the Ministry will truly fall, not when they have an essentially unlimited inflow of cash from all of the purebloods lining up to lick the Dark Lord’s boots. Their money may be mismanaged, but it will not run out if the Dark Lord can be persuaded to levy some sort of tithe.

And he’s curious.

So he takes Tom’s hand, and barely flinches as Tom whirls him away to—

—a Muggle neighbourhood. Percy recognises immediately that they have left the Wizarding World; after so many years of practising his magical awareness, he instantly feels the dull, muted way the air settles on his skin. Instinctively, he shudders, the hair on his back prickling.

“Dreadful, isn’t it? I hated coming to the orphanage each summer,” Tom reveals, leading Percy with quick, sure steps up the street. Percy follows cautiously; Tom must be in a good mood, if he is revealing truths about his past. “It always gave me the most dreadful headache for the first week.”

“It’s like being underwater, or standing in a very hot day,” Percy agrees. “Why didn’t you leave?”

Tom throws him a glance over his shoulder but deigns to respond. “Dumbledore, of course. I think he put the matron under some sort of *Imperius;* I once tried to run away, and I think she contacted him, and he found me within the week.”

“He watched you from such an early age?”

“I tell myself to be flattered that he always knew I would be his enemy,” Tom drawls, though the sardonic edge in his voice cannot hide the tension lingering just out of reach. “He threatened me, the first time he ever met me.”

“He did?” Percy cannot imagine Dumbledore threatening an eleven year old, even Tom Riddle.

“I used to store some—keepsakes, that I took from the Muggles, in my closet at the orphanage,” Tom reveals casually. Percy can read between the lines. “And Dumbledore all but told me that *thievery is not tolerated at Hogwarts*, and I’d be out quicker than a housecat if I didn’t *control myself*.” From the disgust coating those phrases, Percy would guess that they were close, if not exactly, the words that Dumbledore used, though of course he doubts Dumledore would have referenced a housecat rather than a Kneazle.

“I’m sorry,” Percy says honestly. “You didn’t deserve that, least of all from Dumbledore.”

Tom does not respond to this, but perhaps because they have seemingly reached their destination, walking up the pathway to a small Muggle house that looks rather the same as all the other Muggle houses. Except—Percy narrows his eyes at the snow-covered flower bed underneath the left front window. He thinks he knows that flower bed. He thinks he’s been here before.

Tom winks at Percy and then rings the doorbell. A second later, a tall, thin-faced woman answers, wearing a brightly flowered apron and a saccharine-sweet smile that drops off her face at the sight of them.

“He’s not here,” says the woman instantly, her eyes raking up and down Percy’s frame decisively. “He’s with your lot already.”

“May we come in?” Tom asks sweetly. “We have a few questions for you.”

“You cannot,” says the woman, crossing her bony arms. “I don’t want any of your kind in here.”

“Harry’s missing,” Tom says, widening his eyes, as if to express concern. Percy watches silently, unsure of his angle. “Please, we *need* to find him, it’s incredibly urgent.”

The woman—Harry’s aunt, presumably, eyes them with an unimpressed glare. “So find him. Don’t you have some way of tracking each other?”

“He may die, you know,” says Tom. He looks up at Harry’s aunt shrewdly. “But you don’t care, do you?”

The woman gapes for a second at Tom, her face paling and then flushing, as if all the blood receded like water pulling itself back before crashing over the shore. Then she goes to slam the door, but Tom gets there first, shoving his foot in between the crack.

“That isn’t very nice,” Tom breathes, his dark eyes bright. “And we’re friends, aren’t we? Or at least, I would recommend that you want us to be friends.”

For some reason, the Muggle woman flicks her gaze over to Percy, who nods slowly, feeling rather sick to his stomach.

Five minutes later, they are in her kitchen, drinking tea. The great British equaliser, it seems; Percy can now add Harry’s Muggle aunt to the list of people he’s implausibly had tea with in this lifetime, in addition to Narcissa Malfoy, Horatio Smith, Severus Snape, and the Dark Lord, among others.

Tom is looking around him with obvious interest, taking in the strange Muggle gadgets and the scrupulously clean tile. Percy would be looking around with interest too, except he is too busy watching Tom.

What is Tom *playing* at? Why are they here, in Harry’s house? Tom would have to know that Harry would not have any interest in returning to his childhood home. Percy barely knows the boy, and he knows their Chosen One has very little love for his Muggle relatives.

“What do you want?” The woman asks abruptly, clearly having reached her patience with them. Percy cannot see any resemblance with her and Harry, though he supposes they *are* blood relatives through his mother. She’s taller than Harry, for one, and with a far more harsh appearance. Her eyes are a watery blue, nothing like Harry’s startling green, though her dark hair does curl softly at the end like Harry’s.

“Harry is missing,” Tom says. He snaps his finger and the teacup in front of him vanishes. A second later, a cabinet opens and a small glass floats out, hovering in the air. The Muggle flinches violently as it makes its way over to the table, where Tom fills it with water with another snap of his fingers. Tom takes a large sip and sighs, satisfied, wiping his mouth, maintaining eye contact with the woman the entire time. Percy cannot help but give Tom a sideways glance. Can Tom *eat?* “It’s important that we find him.”

“You won’t find him here,” Harry’s aunt says, not taking her eyes off Tom. “He hates us. He never came back after last year—I don’t expect we’ll ever see him again.”

“He didn’t come back?” Tom inquires coolly, taking another sip of the water. “So the blood wards never completed their magic.”

Harry’s aunt stiffens, but, Percy notices, not with surprise. She knows about the blood wards. He would bet money on it.

“I did my best,” the woman says. Her thin lips twist into an expression of impatient disgust. “I took him in, didn’t I? I told him he could return each summer. It’s hardly my fault if he chose not to come. Boy’s seventeen now, he’s not my headache anymore.”

Tom gives Percy an excited look, but Percy isn't sure why it would be important that Harry not complete the blood magic before he reached his majority, but perhaps it means that Harry is less protected than he would be otherwise.

"And what did you think of Harry, Mrs. Dursley?" Tom asks, leaning forward. "Rumour has it he's all that's left to stand up to the Darkest wizard of our time. Do you think he can handle it?"

Is Tom merely seeking information about Harry, directly from the source, as it were? Despite himself, Percy is interested; he tilts his head as he listens to Mrs. Dursley clear her throat with a pained, guttural laugh.

Mrs. Dursley balls up a corner of her apron angrily. "Depends on whose son he really is, I suppose. If he's truly Lily's boy, then I doubt he'll keep his word; but if he's more a *Potter* than an Evans, maybe your lot has a fighting chance."

Tom nods sympathetically. "Muggle blood is fickle," he agrees. Percy watches the way Mrs. Dursley's face spasms, as if to protest, though that would of course contradict her negative statements on Lily.

Another pair of siblings ruined by the war, by their families, by the insurmountable gulf between their lives. Percy wonders, if he were to die, whether his siblings would think any child of his would be more or less trustworthy for having shared his blood.

Well, he knows the answer to that, he suspects.

Try as he might, Tom is unable to get anything useful out of the woman; he inquires after Harry's plans, after Harry's thoughts, even after Harry's friends, but though Mrs. Dursley answers each of his questions, it becomes increasingly obvious that she does not know Harry very well at all. Certainly far less than Percy would expect, considering Harry spent seventeen years under her roof, or something close to it.

"Why did you stop talking to Lily?" Percy finds himself asking, during a rare moment when Tom, stymied, pauses to take an angry sip of his water. It's the first thing he's said since entering the house, and Mrs. Dursley jumps a little as her gaze swings back to land solidly on his face.

"I'm sorry?"

"Your sister," Percy elaborates, the back of his neck flushing. "You stopped speaking to her. Why? When?"

Mrs. Dursley draws herself up with all the affronted outrage she can muster, wearing it in the lines of her shoulders and the crease of her apron, and then spits out, "When she walked into *your* world and never had another glance to spare for me."

Young, then. Percy wonders how many years it had taken, how many terms apart and summers together, for Mrs. Dursley to look at her sister and not recognise her. Or perhaps it

had been the opposite; perhaps Lily, like Tom, had grown tired of the leaden taste of the Muggle world under her tongue and walked out one day without looking back.

“Where’s that horrid man—Dumbledore? Why isn’t he facing off against this Dark wizard?”

“He’s dead,” says Percy, when it becomes clear Tom is not going to respond.

Mrs. Dursley’s face goes through another curious spasm: half shock, half pleasure. “I can’t say I’m sorry to hear that,” she says nastily. “Though I suppose it does not leave very much hope for your side.”

Tom looks up suddenly at this. “You did not like Dumbledore?”

“*He* took Lily away from me,” Mrs. Dursley whispers hoarsely, as if saying it at great personal cost. “*He* took her, and then he forced me to look after her freak of a son. Abandoned him for eleven years, he did, and then just when there was a hope he may be normal, he took him from me too. No, I did not like that man, and I’m not sorry he’s dead.”

She says it with an imperious little sniff, though a fair bit of trembling, as though expecting the pair of them to leap to their feet, wands blazing, at the slight against Dumbledore. Given the wizards she’s probably met before, Percy reckons that it is an understandable reaction. Certainly the Muggle did not expect Tom to smile, a bemused little smile, and say, “I’m not either.”

“I thought all of your little party worshipped the ground he walked on,” says Mrs. Dursley cautiously.

“Luckily for you, Percy and I come from a rather different party,” Tom says coolly. With a fluid, languid movement, he pushes himself out of his seat and stands, stretching, in the centre of the kitchen. His dark, lithe figure is incongruous against the pale colours of the Muggle kitchen. “We’re rather more interested in the Dark wizards. Come, Percy. Do you mind if I take a look around, Mrs. Dursley? Or should I say Petunia; we are friends, are we not?”

Tom leaves Mrs. Dursley behind in the kitchen, her face paling as she realises that she has let two Dark wizards into her kitchen. They look around the small house, but they do not see any sign of Harry, not in the large room displaying oddly still photos of Harry’s plump Muggle cousin, not in the master bedroom, and not even in the small bedroom off to the side, boasting an empty birdcage, a large wardrobe, and nothing else.

“He’s not been here in quite some time,” Percy says after casting a series of spells. He looks around him nervously. “Tom, Harry’s not stupid, and he *hated* his Muggle relatives. I doubt he’d leave anything here worth noticing.”

Tom, however, is staring around him, his nose flared slightly, as if he could smell the traces of Harry’s magic. “Not here,” he mumbles, shaking his head. Percy follows him uneasily as he makes his quick way down the stairs and then hesitates, looking curiously at a small door underneath the stairs, as if it may lead him directly to Harry. “Here.”

It's true; when Percy concentrates, he *can* feel Harry's magic here, more concentrated than in the bedroom upstairs. But when Tom magics open the door, they see that it is a small cupboard—

—But a cupboard with a tiny cot jammed inside, and old, childish drawings of dragons, and a few lead knights lined carefully up on one side.

Tom goes completely still.

Percy gulps, his mouth instantly drying, as his body and his magic instinctively registers the threat next to him. He is very cold; Tom's magic has frozen them both into place, forming small icicles that hang down from the wooden beams stretching across the cupboard, a small layer of frost crusting over an old toy knight that is laying on its side. Percy gasps, his nose beginning to smart, as the temperature in the room drops another few degrees.

When he looks at Tom, he sees that Tom's eyes flash with a glint of red. His face is entirely still, as if carved from the same metal as the toy knights, his lips pulled back in a snarl, his hand gripped so tightly around his temporary wand that Percy would not have been surprised to see it snap into pieces.

"Tom," says Percy.

"They *dared*," says Tom, and Percy inhales automatically at the knife-sharp edge to his voice. Tom gestures harshly at the cupboard, at the undeniable proof that the Boy Who Lived spent an appreciable amount of time shoved into such a tiny space, and Percy swallows nervously around a lump in his throat as his ears register the falling temperature. "They *dared* do this to a wizard."

"Tom, we should leave."

"Why are they still alive?" Tom turns to Percy, and despite the rage on his face, there is genuine confusion lurking behind his twisted features. "Why would Potter leave them *alive*?"

"Perhaps he never had a chance to return, after his majority," Percy suggests nervously, clutching his wand in his pocket. "Perhaps he is merely waiting for his opportunity."

The air warms slightly as Tom considers this. "It is unlikely he will get the opportunity," Tom finally says, fingering his wand thoughtfully. "Perhaps we should—remedy it for him."

"You'd take that from him?" Percy says immediately. He could have kicked himself; Harry is Tom's *enemy*. Why would he want to leave the Dursleys for Harry to kill? It would likely give Tom even more pleasure to take that from Harry.

But Percy's instincts seem to be proven right. Tom, an older version of him, intended to schedule his capture of Harry for after his fifth year OWL exams. He would allow Harry to come back and take his revenge, even if he was waiting in the wings to kill Harry immediately after.

Tom nods, slowly, and then reaches into the open cupboard and takes one of the lead knights. “This will do, for our purposes,” he says. “Notice how they are all imbued with his magic? Early magic, too; unconcentrated magic, straight from the source.”

“What are you trying to do?”

“I’m experimenting with life wards,” Tom says, pocketing the lead knight carefully. He looks up a second later and grins wryly at Percy’s evident shock. “Yes, you did give me the idea. I am hoping to separate his life-force from the Horcruxes.”

“But I thought we agreed that *He* ought to attack Harry directly, thereby fulfilling the prophecy,” Percy objects, his mind spinning with the implication that *Tom* is now trying, indirectly, to *protect* Harry.

Tom waves his hand absently. “Yes; but consider if we can bind the boy’s life-force to an object, like one of your paintings. Then we can kill him whenever we like, or we can deliver it to the Dark Lord, for all we care. The important aspect is that we not unnecessarily eliminate part of my soul.”

“That seems risky, Tom,” says Percy automatically. “Are you not planning for the locket?”

“I cannot go far from the Dark Lord, not for long,” says Tom with an ugly sneer marring his face. “I have been able to…draw on his magic, to power my own. But it limits me.”

Percy hurries past this topic, not wanting Tom to think again of Percy’s father, finally freed from Tom’s grasp. “That seems risky too, Tom.”

“Have you found for me the remainder of the prophecy?”

“Not yet.”

Tom gives him an arch look and holds out his hand, clearly intending to whisk them back to Percy’s flat. “Then you have no right to be positing what may be a threat to me, wouldn’t you say?”

"Dumbledore didn't tell anyone who spoke the prophecy," Percy says obstinately, the same set of excuses he'd told the Dark Lord, though of course rather more politely. "There are no recorded Seers alive. The Department of Mysteries does not seem to have that information, and I investigated them quite thoroughly. I have spoken to some key members of the Order—my eldest brother, for one, the Weasley heir—and I do not believe that Dumbledore told anyone, perhaps not even Harry."

Tom's expression seems to suggest simultaneously that he is not interested in whatever excuses Percy may posit, but also equally so he did not have a path to suggest for Percy to pursue. The Dark Lord's reaction had been much the same.

"Power the Dark Lord knows not, Tom," Percy says quietly.

"What if *I* am the power that the Dark Lord does not know?"

"Tom—"

"I shall not harm the boy, in case he does need to be killed by the Dark Lord," Tom says dismissively. "But I will not stand by and wait indefinitely for *Him* to take action. He is frightened of the prophecy and of the boy. But he is just a boy, Percy. There is nothing for me to fear."

***

In Percy's soul, he calls on Tom, and Tom appears to him after only a few agonised heartbeats of waiting.

"The Dark Lord is trying to combine the other Horcruxes into one," Percy says without preamble, widening his eyes in guileless anxiety for Tom to notice. "Tom, if he does that, he'll be even more powerful than he is now."

Tom growls, flickering slightly in the artificial candlelight of Percy's soul. "He *dares*."

Percy waves this aside. He has heard far too many versions of Tom be outraged at what each of them dare to do, in their quest to be the sole inheritor of their shared power. "Tom, I need to find Harry. Where are you?"

Tom eyes Percy carefully, slyly, the look on his face rather more similar to the Dark Lord's contemplative gaze than to the diadem-Tom's fierce, vivid expressions. "I'm not sure why I ought to tell you," Tom says coolly. "Harry Potter seems to think he may be able to trust you."

Percy blinks, genuinely surprised. "What?"

"He and your brother were discussing *possible allies*," Tom reveals, watching Percy intently. "Your brother seems to think there is a chance you are *pretending* to be allied with the Dark Lord."

Careful, careful. The shadows in Percy's soul seem to grow larger as he controls his panic. "Well, I am pretending to be allied with the Dark Lord," Percy points out, willing himself to stay calm. "Tom, I thought you were irrevocably destroyed. I figured the next best option would be to follow the Dark Lord, but I admit my heart has not been fully in it."

"Your brother says he thinks you saved your father's life."

How could Ron have known…?

Percy shakes it off. He knows now what is bothering Tom. If Percy had an errant thought to spare, he would devote it to understanding why, precisely, both versions of Tom find it so reprehensible that Percy wishes to save his father's life. Surely Tom had met purebloods who valued their families before?

“So I did,” says Percy airily. “My father is a strong pureblood wizard, and though I dislike him, I do not wish him to die without cause. I have questions from him I’d like answered, and I wish for him to designate me the sole heir of the Weasley family, so I may access some of our ancestral magic.” He waits a second for the mistrustful light in Tom’s eyes to begin to dim and adds, casually, “And I have found it to be…advantageous to allow certain members of my family to view my loyalties as ambiguous. I am looking for the full text of the prophecy, Tom. Does Harry know it?”

“It shattered, I believe,” Tom says, distracted by this new idea. As usual, it tugs at something inside Percy to realise that he has grown *older* than Tom, that Tom is no less fallible than any of the other Horcruxes. It is not easy to navigate these conversations with Tom, but it is not particularly *hard* either. “Why are you seeking the prophecy?”

“The section of the prophecy that we know states that Harry Potter will have power the Dark Lord knows not,” Percy says enticingly. “But the crucial last few lines were not heard. Tom, please. Help me find you. We need to join forces.”

“What is it that you want?” Tom asks, abruptly, dragging his attention to land solidly on Percy. Even insubstantial, the force of his gaze is staggering. “I know you, Percy. You are too powerful of a wizard to be content with espionage. You have a privileged position within the Ministry and the Dark Lord’s trust. What is driving you to betray him?”

Percy blinks. “You, my Lord,” he says automatically, though Tom’s attention sharpens at the honorific. “The plans we once made.”

Tom smiles, a thin, mocking smile that carries within it the multitude of Tom’s feelings toward Percy, and Percy’s complex feelings back. “I do not believe you.”

There are a variety of answers that Percy could give; accusatory, pleading, sly. But in the end he goes with the truth, as he always does, when faced with a riddle set to him by Tom. “In truth, I do not know what I want,” Percy admits, and outside the ledge of the Astronomy Tower the sky lightens marginally toward day. “I don’t know who I am without you, Tom. I’ve spent the last…well, nearly my entire adult life working toward bringing you back to life. By the same token, I’ve spent that same time trying to ensure that the Dark Lord is destroyed. He is harming our society and threatening my family and the way of life I hold dear.” Percy catches and holds Tom’s gaze, strangely unafraid. What can Tom do to Percy in the sanctity of his own soul? “I will not apologise for that, nor do I think you would ask me to, if you could see how the Dark Lord is destroying the foundation you built for him on the back of your soul. I don’t know who I would be if we had not met; some pathetic wizard in the Ministry, most likely, slavishly following the Dark Lord and not allowing himself to acknowledge his discontent. You opened my eyes, and it remains to be seen whether that will be to my benefit or to my undoing. I don’t know what I want, but it’s not this. It’s not *Him.”*

“And you think it might be me?” Tom asks, with studied casualness.

Percy can remember being sixteen, both times. For all the advantages his first timeline afforded him, the extra years he lived did not stop him from experiencing the crippling anxiety, insecurity, and false confidence that being sixteen brings rudely into the sanctity of one’s childhood. There is something about being still one year from one’s majority, old

enough to wield one's magic like a sword, to fall in love with a pretty classmate, to kill a wizard if threatened—and yet not loosed freely into the world to leave one's impact on it.

"I don't know," Percy says honestly. "But I know it's not *Him*, and I know that if you do not act quickly, you will lose the chance to prove to the world what you could be."

***

When Severus writes in their shared notebooks that he must speak to Percy, Percy expects the worst. He listens anxiously to Potterwatch, but he does not hear news of his siblings dead, nor of Harry captured. But still, Severus insists that they take the risk to meet up in Severus' house, vacant since their last meeting.

Percy is still keyed into the wards. They evaluate him, as they had last time, and eventually allow him access into the dusty, dark kitchen. Percy flicks a glance to the stove, but there is no pot of oatmeal bubbling merrily, nor coffee brewing. Percy hesitantly opens a cabinet, but he cannot even find tea, and so he merely stands alone in the kitchen until Snape arrives too.

"How many are left?" says Severus when he arrives, by way of greeting Percy and confirming his identity.

"Er, it's a difficult question to answer," replies Percy hastily. "Well, to confirm, at the very least. The Dementor that I've been working with is trying to get us a more definitive answer, so that we may be sure of how many of the Horcruxes are truly destroyed, rather than merely weakened. But—" Percy glances at Severus nervously, "I believe that Tom *did* kill the snake"

For a second, Severus stares at Percy for a heartbeat longer than would be normal, and in his surprise Percy is able to spot the relief and then fear that flits its way briefly across Severus' lined, gaunt face. Percy relaxes; he had thought that there had been tension in Severus' words, during the few times they had been able to speak via their notebooks, and he had guessed that perhaps the tension was due to uncertainty over the snake, which had killed Severus in another life. Then, Severus' face smooths back to its typical scowling mask. "Well, there are other ways to die."

Percy does not say anything. They do not know why, exactly, the Dark Lord killed Severus in the other timeline, and so they cannot be sure it will not happen again. Instead, Percy takes a tentative breath and then fills in Severus on everything that has happened since they last spoke: Tom's destruction of Nagini, Flamel, Percy's conversation with his parents, and Tom. The other Tom.

Severus listens quietly, without asking questions, sitting rigidly in the dust-covered chair as if expecting to be admonished for relaxing his strict posture. Percy finds it difficult to stop talking once he starts, and only halfway through his explanation of the differences that he perceives between the diary and the diadem does he realise how relieved he is to finally share

the horror of the last few months with another person, even one as forbidding as Severus Snape.

“Well,” Severus says when Percy finally finishes, running awkwardly out of steam. “This certainly complicates matters.”

For a heartbeat, Percy only stares at Severus; and then he finds himself laughing, chuckling uncontrollably, more out of anxiety than out of humour, at the sheer arrogance of Severus to sum up his entire sordid tale with *this complicates matters*.

Severus does not look amused, though he does not cut off Percy, waiting until his laughter has petered out and been replaced with little gasps. Then he says, “I have much to report as well. As you know, the Dark Lord broke into Dumbledore’s vault and found the wand missing. He believes Lucius fled with it to France and so has ordered some of his spies to ferret out Lucius. In doing so, he has discovered some of the Order’s evacuation routes and killed Landon Greengrass. I believe he was a classmate of yours?”

Percy sits back heavily in his chair, all lingering vestiges of his relief-filled giggles leaving his lungs abruptly at the news. “*Landon?”*

“He was aiding your brother,” Severus continues, without mercy. “He had secured an internship with the French Ministry of Magic and was using his position to forge papers for the arriving refugees to mark them as pureblood.”

Percy closes his eyes slowly. Of course bloody Landon would try and secure an *internship* while fleeing from a Dark Lord. Of *course* bloody Landon would be arrogant enough to believe he could forge papers without attracting undue attention. Of *course* bloody Landon would not have the sense to flee after Merlinda—likely his British conspirator—was quietly executed.

Landon, dead. Percy’s stomach lurches at the thought, but he shakes his head. He cannot think about it now. He cannot process it. He can only think that Landon is still safely abroad, keeping his head down. If he thinks about Landon dying, he may think of everyone who is dying, and then he may lay down in his bed and never get up.

“Which brother?” Percy asks, and if his voice is a bit hoarse, and his eyes a bit teary, Severus does not comment on it.

“Charles,” says Severus. Percy’s eyes widen and Severus says hastily, “He lives. I do not think your friend gave up his name.”

“But how do you know it was him?”

“I recognized his handwriting on some letters that the Dark Lord found on Greengrass’ person,” says Severus. Percy starts, and Severus explains, “I have familiarised myself with the handwriting of all of your siblings. I have plenty of samples from their insipid attempts at completing their schoolwork.”

For some reason, it is the thought that *Severus Snape* thought to familiarise himself with the handwriting of all of the Weasley children, just in case they may be captured or otherwise implicated, is enough to make Percy nearly break down in tears then and there. But he does not start crying, at least not in front of Severus. Instead, he leans forward and says, choking, "*Thank you*, Severus."

"It was not out of sentiment," Severus responds immediately. "But rather pragmatism. Your family is incapable of staying out of the heart of danger, and I know that they make you vulnerable."

Percy waves this aside. "*Thank you*," he repeats emphatically. "You already know I could never forget what you've done for me, Severus—but I won't forget this either."

Severus gives a disgruntled sniff, though Percy knows the other man well enough to spot the way his face relaxes just slightly. "You ought to be less saccharine. This type of emotion is a weakness, Weasley."

"So, the Dark Lord k-killed Landon," Percy says, forcing out the words. "What else?"

"He is planning an attack on Hogwarts. He believes he will be able to take it as a stronghold. If Potter is drawn to it, he will attack Potter there; otherwise, he will use it as his new base of operations."

"So you have spoken to him often," says Percy in surprise.

Severus' expression turns dark and complex. "Yes."

Percy finds himself abruptly relieved that he has not been so frequently called to the Dark Lord's side. Certainly he must attend the weekly meetings and complete the brewing tasks on schedule. Certainly he speaks to the Dark Lord, most often merely replying to his questions with a polite *yes, my Lord* or *no, my Lord.* Certainly it sometimes frustrates Percy that he is not as involved in the Inner Circle as Severus.

Over the next few days, however, Percy is grateful that he is beneath Voldemort's notice. Landon screams for him in his dreams, every night without fail, strangled and slaughtered and battered and bloody, dying in every infinite variety that Percy is now familiar with, and in each death Percy sits back and watches it happen without moving. Landon dies in his dreams, again and again, and during the day even the strongest stimulant that Percy can brew is hardly sufficient to compensate for his tortured, insubstantial sleep. It is all that Percy can do to order Pius to remain inside silently; as a result, rumours begin to arise that the Minister of Magic is planning another governmental purge, which sends everyone into a tizzy but only dimly registers with Percy, who is too consumed by his own regrets to pay strict attention to his surroundings.

Perhaps he'd saved Fred; *perhaps,* given that until the war is over, Percy cannot be sure. But to save Fred to damn Landon? Landon was not his brother, but to Percy's numb surprise, his death hurts all the same, an indelible mark on his conscience, an everlasting blemish on his soul.

For an entire week, Percy feels as though he is drowning. He does not speak to Tonks, even when she leaves him a coded message on his desk. He does not speak to Yaxley, either, who concludes bizarrely that Percy is nursing a broken heart and tries to bully him out to the pub on two separate occasions. He does not speak to anyone because it feels like every word out of his mouth spirals out of control, chaining together a noose of tarnished metal links, settling without warning around a wizard's neck, his face blurred and insubstantial, anonymous until those last crucial moments.

He may have remained in this state forever, crippled by aching, awful guilt, if he hadn't walked into the office a few days later, only for Tom to appear soundlessly in front of him, levitating the bound body of—Percy squints—Henry.

For nearly five heartbeats, Percy and Henry lock eyes, silently. Percy is entirely nonplussed; Henry is a *pureblood*, though a Light pureblood, and as far as Percy knows, he isn't part of the Order. Then he shakes his head and sound begins to rush in. Only then does Percy realise how mutedly he had been experiencing these last few days, how horrid they'd all been.

Tom chuckles, the sound vibrating in the shared space between he and Percy. "Found him loitering outside, working up the courage to go inside. He's the one you hated, right?"

Percy tries to recall what he's told Tom about Henry, even as Henry's eyes widen in surprise. Diary-Tom certainly heard his fill of complaints from Percy, but had he said anything to this Tom?

"I don't *hate* him," Percy excuses himself. "And he's a pureblood, Tom. He shouldn't be trussed up like this."

Tom's eyes flash and Percy holds his breath, suddenly aware of the chiding tone of his voice, as if he were speaking to Julian or Matthew. But then Tom relaxes and snaps his fingers, and the bindings fall off Henry, who falls to the floor with an unpleasant thump.

To Henry's credit, however, he straightens when he gets to his feet gracefully, throwing his shoulders back, as if a Head Boy badge were glistening on the front of his robes. Then he says, a bit coolly, "You've got good security, Percy."

Tom bristles immediately, and Percy, noticing, says quickly, "Henry, this is—Tom. Tom, Henry."

Henry gives Tom a short, shallow bow, as he would upon meeting a new pureblood of an unfamiliar family. Tom merely inclines his head shallowly, his eyes dark and upset.

"What is it, Henry?" Percy does not offer Henry a seat; he does not like the confluence of Tom and Henry in the same room, which is beginning to feel very small.

Henry's eyes narrow, just slightly, but he takes a small scroll out of his robes and hands it to Percy. "I hate to be the one to tell you this," he says, his voice softening, "but Landon's—died, I'm afraid. We're having a small funeral for him, and I wanted to invite you."

Tom's gaze flicks immediately to Percy, who has very studiously not mentioned Landon's name to Tom, both for Landon's and Tobias' sakes. Percy takes the scroll and examines it quickly: time, date, and the unpleasant news that Tobias has moved back to Britain, the imbecile.

Then he rolls up the scroll and secrets it away in his own robes. His own shoulders straightening, he says crisply, "I will not be attending, and moreover, neither should you." Henry's eyebrows begin to raise, and Percy continues with emphasis, "Landon was a blood traitor, Henry."

"A—a blood traitor?" Henry asks dubiously. "Percy, I think that's a bit of a stretch, don't you?"

Trying not to look at Tom, dangerously silent, Percy wars with himself and then reveals, "He was helping, I believe, with some sort of escape route out of Britain. Nothing particularly successful, and the Aurors shut it down months ago, but Landon was killed for trying to resist."

"*Landon*?"

Luckily, Henry is so surprised as to not say anything else incriminating, like expressing support for Landon's betrayal of the Ministry. Percy purses his lips, as if disgusted, and says, "I trust you see why neither of us ought to attend his funeral. I would recommend you caution the other invitees similarly. It would not do any of us good to be associated with his treachery."

Henry shakes his head, clearly thrown by the news that bookish, prudish Landon was the one to illegally run an escape route out of the country. But then he refocuses on Percy and says, "So you knew."

"I knew when he was apprehended, recently," Percy corrects quickly, not wanting Tom to draw the wrong conclusion. "I was surprised and saddened to hear it. I always had a fondness for Landon, back when we were in school."

Henry snorts, unimpressed. "You were his best friend."

"We shared a few classes together," Percy says dismissively. His heart is beating quickly in his chest, saliva gathering at the corners of his mouth, as his body instinctively responds to the threat in the room. "He had a keen mind, but even then, seemed determined to waste his talents on useless minutiae. I had hopes for him when he joined the Unspeakables, but I suppose he fancied himself a bit of a vigilante, by the end." Percy pauses and then says, drawing himself up to his full height, "I would ask, Henry, that you inform me of any other of our old classmates that may have similar…inclinations."

"So that you may kill them too?" Henry inquires acidly.

"Landon's death was a dreadful waste," Percy bites out. Henry's face changes as he registers Percy's sincerity, though it is clear he does not understand the undercurrents to the

conversation. “I do not believe he was beyond saving, merely misguided, and likely more than a bit bored, over in France. I do not wish for any of you to go down the same path.”

Henry’s eyes flick to Tom, who is watching impassively next to Percy. “I see. Warning us out of the goodness of your heart, are you?”

Percy bristles, his grip tightening on his wand. He *is* warning Henry out of the goodness of his heart, even if the entitled prat will never see the warning for what it is. “I’m afraid I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Only that I didn’t expect you to turn so eagerly to the *new order*,” Henry responds, his tone full of mockery. “Did you know that Theodora’s been captured? Likely she’s dead already. Didn’t take very long for you to abandon us, did it?”

Tom stirs. “Interesting that he thinks he deserves your allegiance,” he points out softly.

“It *is* a new order,” Percy snaps back, ignoring Tom. “It’s a very new order, and if you don’t want to end up like Landon, you’d do best to get yourself in line, Henry. You are not irredeemable, but you will be, if you continue to say unwise things in public.”

“Would you be the one to kill me?” Henry asks in a light, interested tone, as if inquiring whether Percy would be the one to grade one of his exams. “Only, I’d love to know what you consider in your job description.”

“I wouldn’t lower myself to kill you,” Percy hisses contemptuously. “And it’s not just me you have to worry about, Henry. We’re not in school anymore.”

“Funny you say that,” Henry says back, his eyes flicking meaningfully around the plush interior of the Minister’s office. “Looks like you’ve finally elected yourself Head Boy of something, hmm?”

“Crucio,” Percy spits out around the roaring in his ears, his wand coming up to perform the complicated manoeuvre of the spell automatically. Percy has never been particularly *good* at the Cruciatus, but with Tom’s delighted laughter in his ears and the oddly satisfying sound of Henry screaming, he manages to cast the spell perfectly, watching Henry’s body jerk oddly on the floor.

Then he comes to his senses, all at once, and ends the spell, stomach sick with horror. What is he *doing?* Is he so immature that a single taunt about a school position is enough to cause him to torture his own classmates?

You had to do it, he tells himself firmly, watching impassively as Henry, pale and trembling, scrabbles for purchase against the Minister’s deep plum rug. *Tom was beginning to question you. You cannot show mercy, not to anyone.*

So Percy kneels next to Henry, his wand in hand, and whispers deliberately into his ear, “You don’t want to cross me, Henry; we are not in school, and these are not schoolboy squabbles any longer. If you do not want a place in this new world, I would suggest you save us all the

hassle and turn yourself in; otherwise, I expect to see your behaviour improved upon our next meeting."

Henry nods frantically, some of his bravado melting away in the face of the pain inflicted by Percy's wand. Percy wonders, even as he watches Henry struggle to his feet, what form his Cruciatus took for Henry. Did he feel it as knives slicing into the layers of his skin, or whips of fire, or the persistent, gnawing pain of a toothache growing in intensity until he could think of nothing else but to die?

"You may use the Minister's Floo," Percy says magnanimously when Henry has finally pushed himself to his feet. "As a token of my good regard for you. Give my greetings to the rest of the batch when you see them, will you?"

Henry swallows and stumbles to the Floo, taking a handful of Floo powder from the jar on top of the mantlepiece without comment. He throws it into the fire and mumbles his address, but right before he steps into the emerald flames, he turns and looks at Percy for one long second, his grey eyes searching for something in Percy's face.

Percy hopes that whatever he is seeking, he sees only resolve. Henry had better heed his warning, and take it to the rest of the impulsive Gryffindors besides, before they do anything rash and force Percy's hand.

When Henry has finally disappeared, Tom laughs, a short, abrupt bark that breaks the heavy silence in the office. "Well," he says, looking at Percy with delight. "Well, well, well. That was the best I've ever seen your Cruciatus. How did it feel?"

Like I want to throw up. "Perhaps I simply needed the proper motivation," Percy says, saying the words automatically with a tongue that feels as if Fred and George had dosed him with one of their candies.

Merlin, he hopes that Henry will tell them all to be *careful*.

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A message, decoded by Nymphadora Tonks: *Escape routes compromised. Focus elsewhere.*

A reply, decoded by Percival Weasley: *Not while there are still targets in the country.*

The problem is, as Tonks points out to them when she eventually corners him during his solitary walk home, is that there isn't much for the Order to *do.* As the months pass, the number of Muggleborns still at risk rapidly diminishes, as they are either captured or spirited away. Nott keeps his squadron of Aurors busy rooting out undesirables, but there are only so many people who still openly dare to defy the Dark Lord.

There are weekly, if not daily, reports of traitors apprehended, of course; just enough to continually stoke the fears of whatever purebloods are stupid enough to actually believe the

new order has been installed for their own protection and justify the continued existence of martial law. But Percy knows better than most that those are largely manufactured. Occasionally there are raids on people suspected to be traitors, those accused of harbouring fugitives or hosting listening parties for *Potterwatch*, but even those have diminished with time.

There are parties, like the Yule Party that Percy had so reluctantly attended, and galas with foreign leaders, and luncheons that Pius attends, his oily smile on display as he obediently parrots the party line. There are meetings to discuss the revised Hogwarts curriculum, to debate what should happen to the children unfortunate enough to be born Mudbloods, to propose raising Hogwarts tuition. The Wizengamot continues to hear trials, and any pureblood wizard in good standing can propose a new bill, and many take this opportunity of political instability to try to push through their own agendas.

In short, their world is merely a shifted one, a parallel image of the same activities and machinations and anxieties as the other one, and the Order is having trouble without a clear enemy to fight.

"We need Harry," says Percy intently. "That should be the Order's overriding concern. There is no way to win the war without Harry. You could kill every Death Eater and you would not be able to kill the Dark Lord unless Harry fulfils his role in the prophecy. Rally every single member of the Order that can be trusted and tell them that they must find Harry. But *carefully*, Tonks." His mind is immediately whirring ahead, considering the risks. "If the Death Eaters find Harry the war will be won for the other side. So do not tell anyone that lacks subtlety."

Tonks begins to hotly protest that all of the Order members can be trusted, but Percy stops her with a cold, determined look.

"The second that Harry is found, I must be informed. Promise me, Tonks."

For a long, tense stretch, Percy wonders if Tonks is going to argue. But maybe something in his face convinces her, so she merely nods her disguised head and Apparates away.

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Percy had wondered how long it would take Tom to catch on to the fact that the Dark Lord planned to entrap him back in an object, thereby neutralising him as a threat without removing a precious Horcrux. Percy certainly had not said anything, to either party, but Voldemort and Tom both seemed content, in their own ways, to ready their magic for a confrontation with the other. Tom's control over his magic seems to grow by the day, until Percy views it as a slim needle, or a slender knife, capable of carving fine lines when needed. Voldemort, meanwhile, presumably manages to complete whatever elemental rituals he'd begun in Malfoy Manor the previous year, until Percy can sense him coming long before he arrives, his magic hovering around him like crackling clouds of thunder.

But when the confrontation comes, it is not between these two shades of the same soul.

It is largely Percy's fault. He'd known that Voldemort had tasked Tom with finding Harry, and he'd known Tom had taken that toy knight from the Dursley home. Percy had mistakenly concluded that since Tom never mentioned it again, he'd forgotten about it, or at the very least strategically de-prioritised the task until he was ready to wrestle control from Voldemort.

But perhaps Voldemort says something suspicious to Tom, or Tom felt more ready than Percy would have guessed, or maybe even Tom was curious about the subject of the prophecy. Percy isn't told anything. Only a few days after Henry comes to see Percy, Tom requests Percy's presence after work at a set of Apparation coordinates, which Percy hastily copies to Severus, in case of an attack. The note that Tom leaves couldn't possibly be left by anyone else. His magic leaves such a distinctive trace on the note that Percy, touching it gently, can almost recall the sight of Tom sitting down to write it.

Trap or no trap, Percy follows the instructions, as Tom must have known he would. And when he arrives, in the centre of a large yellow field, clearly a Muggle farmland—though an oddly barren one, with rusting Muggle equipment and a flock of unfriendly crows—he finds, true to form, that Tom is alone.

(***Percy?*** asks Tom, hesitantly, inside Percy's head.)

"What is this place?" Percy asks, walking up to Tom with more confidence than he feels. "Felt like mingling with the Muggles?"

Tom scoffs, casting a dismissive look to the red and green automobile with a large gleaming shovel of some sort attached haphazardly to the front. "You'd better ask Potter that."

"*Potter?"*

The minute that Percy says the name, he feels a flash of unease, so similar to his own that he does not immediately recognise it as Tom's, inside his body.

Tom nods and points to a small indentation of grass, a few metres away. "He's there, under some surprisingly heavy wards," Tom says, nonchalantly. He hasn't raised his voice, but Percy has one of those uncomfortably familiar feelings that he has been brought here to be an audience to Tom's drama. "By now, he's figured out the anti-Apparation wards I've cast are presenting him from leaving unless he reveals himself."

"I see," says Percy slowly, though of course he does not. "And may I ask why we are here?" He hesitates and then adds recklessly, "Decided to do the Dark Lord's bidding, have you?"

Tom's eyes flash with anger and the hint of a red sheen. Percy shuts his mouth with a soft click, recognising that perhaps he had crossed the line. "We are here, Percy, because I have discovered that Potter has something of mine, and I want it back."

(***Percy!***)

"Oh," says Percy, weakly. He does not question how Tom had discovered that Harry had a Horcrux, but he hopes that Tom's control over his magic has not extended to sensing the other Horcruxes, not when there are two— *three* —now so proximal to each other. This also presents a tangle for Percy; among the many things that Percy has not told Tom is that the diary was not destroyed in their last confrontation. Percy briefly contemplates bluffing—*the diary is alive?*—but is faced with the perennial problem that he does not know what Tom already knows. If this is a test, Percy is not ready to fail it.

But there's the other Tom, the diary-Tom, possibly listening too, either in Percy's head or through Harry's eyes. And to which Tom does Percy owe his loyalty?

(Or perhaps he does not owe either of them his loyalty?)

Percy curses at himself, knowing that this exact ethical and moral quandary is one that he has known he had to resolve for a very long time, and his anxiety has prevented him from solving it prior to this day. It feels abruptly like he has homework that he'd known was due and neglected nevertheless, his fourteen years of schooling rearing its ugly head despite the stakes of the situation.

The truth, then. Percy has been somewhat lucky with telling the truth, but that generally relies on their being enough of the truth for Percy to withhold successfully.

In the meantime, Tom has turned to where Harry must be huddling under his tent, perhaps bemused over Tom's identity, or perhaps sickeningly aware of who Percy is standing beside. "Potter," Tom calls out gruffly. Percy is struck, watching how Tom seems to waver just slightly, by how unsure of himself Tom must be, despite his confident exterior. Harry is his enemy, but an enemy that he wishes to leave to the Dark Lord, which makes him somewhat of an ally, particularly because Tom knows that Harry is one of his Horcruxes. "You have a Horcrux, a dangerous magical artefact. I am planning on removing it. I do not mean you any harm—you may use a spell to send the Horcrux out of the wards."

For a crazy second, Percy thinks that perhaps Harry will agree, and the small black book will come floating out of the folded wizardspace behind Hermione's wards.

Tom rolls his eyes to himself at the quiet whistling of the wind through the long, unkempt grass. "Potter," he calls out again, his voice tense. "I swear to you that I do not mean you any harm. I swear to you that I will neutralise the Horcrux. I have brought you an ally of yours—a Weasley, pretending to aid the Dark Lord, but really aiding in an operation to remove the Horcruxes from causing harm."

Percy gives Tom a baleful look that the wizard ignores with ease. It reminds Percy of Voldemort ensuring that Theodora knew precisely who was betraying her. Both of them seem keen to inform everyone around them exactly whose side Percy is on. Tom has also made it impossible for Percy to show this memory to the Dark Lord without implicating himself.

"I will give you thirty seconds before I take down the wards." Now Tom's brow is furrowed with irritation, now his magic sparks around his fingers, eager to be let out.

Tom, Percy thinks in his head deliberately, unsure how to communicate this way with the diary, but needing to try nevertheless, *I hope you have a plan for what is coming.*

Harry, stubborn or cautious fool that he is, does nothing. Tom rolls his eyes and extends his hands, his fingers splayed, as if searching for the edges of the wards floating in the air. Then his index finger twitches, and Percy feels Tom's magic concentrate precisely on a patch of plain sky, and he slices through Hermione's wards like they are a sheet fluttering in the wind.

And behold, four teenagers, dirty, defiant, tired, and *unshielded.*

Percy wants to scream, both at the sight of *Draco Malfoy* sitting alongside the Boy Who Lived, and at the notion that these *idiot children* have still not learned to keep their shield charms up.

Tom's eyes widen at the sight of Draco, but they latch on hungrily to Harry, who is sporting a bruise on his cheek and a defiant expression as if he's preparing to fight to the death.

"Potter," Tom says, regaining some of his characteristic suave. "How nice to see you at last."

"I don't think we've met," Harry says coolly, clutching his wand tightly. "But I have a fairly good idea who you are, though I don't quite understand how."

Of course. Percy suddenly remembers that Harry had talked to Tom in person in the Chamber. No wonder he hadn't given over the diary. It must be confusing to him to see another form of Tom. He must be sure that Percy is being possessed.

Tom flicks a glance to Percy, who says, "Harry stumbled upon the Chamber of Secrets during my sixth year."

"Right, of course," agrees Tom, though Percy cannot remember if Tom had not known that. Both of his lives at times seem to fold on each other, stretched and distorted by the multitude of lies he's told each actor, not to mention the lies he's surely told himself. "How forgetful of me. I suppose you are wondering whether you can trust my claim that I intend to remove the other Horcruxes. If you are aware of who I am, I'm sure you can appreciate the…risk they pose to me."

"But they're you," Hermione pipes up, apparently unable to keep her mouth shut even despite the fact that she is the most in danger of them all.

Percy sees her confusion mirrored on Ron's and Harry's faces, though Draco, interestingly, looks like he understands being at war with himself, being his own greatest risk.

"Granger, I presume." Percy does not know whether Tom is going to claim neutrality on the issue of Mudbloods. Certainly his expression does not reveal whether he would like to strike Hermione down solely due to her blood status. In fact, Tom goes as far as to say, "Your wards were—powerful, surprisingly so."

Hermione blushes despite herself. Percy gives Tom a sharp glance. The last thing he wants is to have Hermione tempted over to Tom's little army of followers. Percy can easily imagine

Hermione as a successful Dark witch.

"You view them as threats to you," says Harry, clutching his pocket tightly—and, Percy can't help but notice, rather protectively. Has Tom wormed his way as capably into Harry's head as he'd once done to Percy?

After all, Percy had no *proof* that Tom couldn't possess Harry. For all Percy knows, Tom has been controlling Harry for months, while playing Percy for a fool. It makes him feel betrayed, and that it does makes him feel angry.

And abruptly, Percy is tired of this battle, tired of Harry and both versions of Tom, tired of everyone ignoring him until they need an audience, tired of his own inaction. "So let your magic decide."

Percy has the gratifying experience of seeing all of their attention snap to him. He is suddenly sure that the Trio, at least, all previously assumed him to be mute and possessed, or at least there not of his own free will. And while Percy is not precisely there because of his own desires, he is not yet a slave and cannot help but feel obstinately committed to making that fact clear.

Tom's face is a warning, that light, interested façade that speaks to his displeasure. "What do you mean?"

"Let your magic decide," Percy repeats, gesturing at Harry. "The diary can take form; I've seen it do it before. If there can only be one of you—let your magic decide on which it is." Without allowing anyone to respond, Percy summons the diary with a vicious spell. It rips through Harry's pocket and lands with a smack in Percy's palm. He winces but does not feel any of the agony the locket had inflicted on him, as if the diary did not wish to hurt him. "Tom," Percy says loudly to it, though the expressions on everyone's faces range from sceptical to concerned. "We wish to speak to you. It's me—Percy."

For a second, nothing happens, but Percy is not concerned. He can feel Tom gathering strength, feel the swirl of power pulling itself together, condensing into a form. And—Percy knows Tom, and if there's one thing Tom can't resist, it's a challenge.

Like a tired spirit called to another's bidding, many millennia after it was first formed into being, Tom emerges from the diary, sluggishly at first, and then with a sudden pulse of energy that echoes through Percy's chest. Harry makes an involuntary sound at the sight of this Tom, so like the other.

This Tom is blurrier, more insubstantial, and clearly the younger of the pair. Percy is struck yet again, as he has been only once or twice before, by the way that Tom's cheeks still retain a hint of childish roundness, how his lips purse with a shadow of petulance. Percy wonders whether this version of Tom *is* younger than the one Percy encountered in his memories and his Chamber, or whether he has grown used to seeing his own face in his twenties and Tom's, too.

His Tom—well, the older Tom, the diadem Tom, the Tom Percy brought into being—is perfectly impassive, his face not cold nor warm but as if sketched on the page with a hard

piece of charcoal. The diary-Tom flicks a glance around, his gaze passing over Percy and Harry, and then a mocking smile twists over his face, and it feels familiar, and Percy is, despite himself, relieved.

"So it has come to this," says the younger Tom. Percy does not know how much he had heard or gleaned from the past few minutes, but younger or not, Tom has always been quick to understand. "I suppose there is no way we can both exist together."

"The Horcruxes were a mistake," replies the other Tom, and Percy is astonished to hear it. The younger Tom's face tightens, nearly imperceptibly, against Harry's involuntary intake of breath. "There are other ways to live forever."

"I considered them—"

"—you did not consider them enough," snaps Tom, and the diary subsides angrily.

It strikes Percy, looking at Tom's carefully empty face, that while he has his fair share of regrets, he cannot imagine *this.* To despise each of his choices, at every age; to be disappointed in his past and future and perhaps even the present…

Well, Percy realises uncomfortably, perhaps he *can* imagine it. He thinks of his painfully optimistic younger self, his damned arrogance and prideful isolation, his conviction that the impenetrable web he wove in this new timeline of lies and counter-lies and desperate actions borne of perceived necessities, of everything he will still need to do in the future, of everything he feels compelled to do now…

"For the greater good," replies the diary-Tom, and Percy shakes away his self-recriminations at least once more as a strange, meaningful look passes through the two Toms at the phrase.

And through Harry. "Did you follow Grindelwald?" He says suddenly, breaking the tense silence between the two Horcruxes, who make identical looks of confusion at the interruption.

For the greater good has been Grindelwald's slogan, Percy remembers belatedly. For all his research into Tom, he'd not encountered a connection with Grindelwald.

The older Tom shakes his head disdainfully. "He was not a true Dark Lord," he says dismissively. "He ruled only for grudges, for fame. He did not devote himself to the Dark Arts."

"Dumbledore and he were friends," Harry says. It has a strange edge of desperation in it; Percy cannot help but notice Ron and Hermione exchange worried, exasperated looks.

Rita Skeeter had reported the friendship between Dumbledore and Grindelwald, but Percy had never believed it, particularly because Aberforth and Harry had put out a joint statement after the war, disavowing everything in the book and claiming Rita had *Confunded* Bagshot. Percy would believe a great many accusations against Dumbledore, but that he once supported the wizard he so publicly defeated? It would be as if Harry befriended Voldemort, followed him loyally, only to to draw his wand on him at the very end.

And indeed, both of the expressions on Tom's faces seem to suggest they too do not believe these rumours. But all the older Tom says is, "Dumbledore was never the wizard that everyone thought he was."

And surprisingly, Harry, who once shouted so fervent a defence of Albus Dumbledore that his own phoenix came running, says nothing.

The two Horcruxes return their attention to each other, slender noses in profile, the small bow on their top lips mirroring each other, brows furrowed. "If you've called me here to defeat me," the younger Tom says conversationally, "I'm afraid I shall have to protest."

The diadem-Tom's lips quirk involuntarily. "I'm afraid your suspicions are correct, so you may protest in any way you see fit. I do warn you, though, that I am far more powerful than you, and it would be…less painful, for us both, if you were to submit without question."

Tom's face is rueful, much more openly so than the other Tom's, which betrays its regrets only through the clench of its jaw. "And I suppose there is no way for us to…forestall this issue until we've defeated *Him*."

Percy can tell this surprises the diadem-Tom. "You wish to defeat *Him* as well?"

"If there is to be only one of us," says Tom with a hint of amusement, "do you truly wish it to be *Him?"*

For a second, it seems as though the older Tom is reconsidering, contemplating whether an allegiance would suit his private purposes. He gives Percy a contemplative glance, and Percy can only widen his eyes meaningfully, and hope Tom gleans whatever answer he is looking for in Percy's face.

Presumably he finds it, for a few seconds later Percy feels the instantly recognisable icy bite of Tom's magic, unleashed from its cage, nipping at their heels. Harry flinches, as does Draco, almost in unison, though perhaps for different reasons. Ron and Hermione, less attuned to the Dark Lord's magic, look only grim and worried, holding their wands tightly in their grimy hands.

And then the other Tom calls his magic forth too, and Percy can feel their magic intermingling, like the junction of two great rivers meeting in a lonely wood, churning and frothing with angry stubbornness. He feels their magic send out dozens of tiny fingers, creeping around the edge of the curtains raised by each wizard, searching for a place of weakness to grip and tear.

"We will let our magic decide, just as Percy said," says Tom, cunningly, and the other Tom loses the barest edge as he glances toward Percy with a question glimmering in his hazy eyes.

"I—" Percy begins, in desperate supplication, but then he falls to the floor, screaming, as *his* Tom finds a vulnerability in the other Tom's shields and yanks at it, hard enough that it tears at something in Percy's chest too.

It sears. It hurts like nothing else Percy has ever encountered, not like when he slipped in between his father's soul and Tom's, not like the memory of the ring being torn into a Horcrux, not like any of the curses that Voldemort has inflicted on him, because this hurt comes from within, from somewhere inside him that should speak only of the calm whisper of fir trees and gently creaking staircases, that should be a little grand and imperious but warm and welcoming and a little self-consciously playful, once the first few levels of defences have been breached. But as Tom overpowers himself, he encounters a thousand tiny strands connecting himself to Percy, and Percy feels both of their betrayals and covetousness and harsh, mingled prides as Tom begins to cut each strand with meticulous care.

Percy is vaguely aware that someone is holding him, someone whose magic is as familiar to him as his own, Weasley magic, magic of the soil and the land. He clutches two handfuls of grass, working his fingers into the dirt, scrabbling to get a purchase on the pain as Tom continues to sever himself from Percy.

He hears Tom's voice, all of Tom's voices, an endless whisper of ***Percy…Percy…Percy…*** and cries out brokenly, angrily, and his anger grounds him along with the dirt under his fingernails, and he begins to pull back too.

You promised, echoes Tom in Percy's head, and Percy laughs, harshly, for hasn't he done everything he'd promised, to all of these Toms, to each one in turn?

He feels a flicker of betrayal from his Tom, or one of them, a realisation of how tightly Percy has been tied to them. Then an expulsion of magic. Then the other Tom begins to flag, and Percy feels him rearing back, scrambling for a second wind, as he realises belatedly what the first Tom had intended. For as Tom pulls on the other Tom's magic, he does not destroy it, or release it into the world to go back to wherever magic lingers until a wizard forces it to do its bidding. Rather he *pulls,* inexorably, and Tom's magic slips out of his grasp and into the other Tom's.

But not his soul.

This seems significant to Percy, even in the midst of his agony. As Tom's magic is stolen by his counterpart, his soul stays put, though it grows weaker, flickering out, as Tom begins to fade.

And with a rush it is over, the last chord between Percy and Tom snaps, a flood of magic washes over Tom, and Percy falls to the ground, nearly boneless, supported only by Ron and inexplicably Draco, who must have rushed to him somewhere in that confused rush of pain.

Through blurry eyes, Percy glimpses a Tom standing very straight, and very tall, and suddenly thinks of a young, ambitious sapling, like the one that used to live outside of Percy's window, reaching its branches optimistically higher and higher each year, until the twins, their window right above Percy's, produced a cloud of noxious smoke that travelled through those stately, glossy leaves, down the smooth and graceful boughs and into the hidden tangle of roots, suffocating it, until Percy's mother felled it with an efficient spell, ignoring Percy's fervent protests.

This Tom looks younger. Not quite as young as sixteen, but—younger. More the age of Percy, his mental age, or slightly older than his physical one. He rolls his head on his neck experimentally and stretches out a web of his fingers, surveying the bright sparks of magic that leap eagerly to his bidding.

Then, he looks at Percy, and smiles, a slow, and sort of self-satisfied smile, and it sparks a discordant clang in Percy's chest and makes it suddenly difficult to breathe.

Tom's gaze sharpens as he registers Percy's half-prone position and the dirt smeared on his wrists. He takes a step toward Percy, but Harry is first, and stands between them, wand at the ready.

"Now what, Tom?" Harry asks coolly, his voice only marginally rattled, as if watching two Horcruxes destroy each other is a standard activity in which he engages.

But Tom does not spare any attention to Harry, the surprise of which travels through the other wizards like a tangible shock. He brushes Harry aside with a small wave of his fingers, sending a gust of wind that forcibly pushes Harry away, and makes it to Percy's side in three quick steps.

"Tom," says Percy, faintly, aware of the precarious position they are all in, his brother to his right and that strange ghost-brother from another lifetime to his left. He cannot leave them to Tom's whims. "I need to go home. Please."

"What's happened to you?" Tom demands, reaching out with his long, slender fingers, but not quite making contact.

Percy shrugs weakly, some instinct telling him that for all Tom wants him to be strong, this is the right move for this strangely taut moment. And—Percy *is* weak, his magic slow and pained, something inside him reeling at Tom's sudden loss. With Tom, as always, the truth helps Percy to move forward with clarity. "Please."

Tom closes his fingers on Percy's shoulder, displacing Draco and then Ron without a second thought and then whisks them away to their flat. The Apparation nearly undoes Percy, his stomach roiling uncomfortably, and he sags upon arrival, resting heavily on the rough edge of the chair nearest to him.

"Come," orders Tom crisply. Percy follows obediently, even when it becomes clear that Tom is leading him—half pulling, half lifting with his magic—to his bedroom, installing him on the bed and commanding the sheets to cover him. If Percy had thought it odd to have Severus hovering in his tiny, white-walled room, it is far stranger to have Tom, perching a physical body upon the edge of the bed, the sheets crinkling under his implausible body. "Why are you ill?"

"The diary," admits Percy, who stares at the ceiling but finds his gaze continually drawn back to Tom, whose presence is like a summoning charm. "When it possessed me, all those years ago, I think it left…something attached to my magic."

"So you knew it was still active."

Percy hesitates. "I heard his voice, sometimes," he admits, his voice low and gravelly with shame. "Your voice. But I thought I imagined it. We examined the diary thoroughly…we judged it to be destroyed…I was not convinced, but I thought I was just…" he nearly trails off, but the expectant silence forces him to continue his words. "... mourning you, unwilling to accept the facts."

"And so you brought me to life, thinking he gone," completes Tom. "Do you regret it, knowing he was not destroyed?"

"No," says Percy, and not because it is clearly the only answer he can give. "That version of you is…young. When I was young too, he was what I needed. But now…"

This time, he does trail off, returning his gaze pointedly to the ceiling, cheeks flushing, not wanting to see Tom's expression of disdain. Percy must seem impossibly young to Tom too.

The sheets crinkle as Tom shifts uncomfortably, an odd display of human emotion that they both pretend had not occurred. Then, "Severus told me that you cared for me as if I were your own soul," Tom says abruptly. "And so you did. He—I—it…the diary, it was connected to your soul, taking shelter in it. I do not think you would have been able to discover it. Wizards cannot see their own souls, even I. That is why you were so afflicted."

For a second, Percy reels at many of the words in that sentence. But he has to ask, cautiously, returning his gaze to Tom. "And Tom, the diary, it is…"

"It is destroyed now, and the soul piece absorbed within me, like the snake," Tom confirms. The sheets crinkle again as Tom shifts to face Percy, one long leg lifting to steady himself on the bed. Percy, laying flat on his back, has an odd sense of vertigo. It occurs to him suddenly that Tom is very close to him, and his magic is nearly intoxicating at this distance. He must keep his head, must focus on the implication that Tom had not realised he had destroyed the soul fragment of the Horcrux after absorbing its magic, that Tom did not know it possible to walk among the gently waving trees of one's own soul. But then Tom reaches out again, and Percy flinches violently as Tom touches the line of his cheekbone, right under his eye, and traces the finger down the line of Percy's jaw, down to his throat, which convulses nearly automatically at the electric surprise of Tom's touch.

"You have cared for me like your own soul," says Tom again, repeating Severus' words reverently. "With your own soul, you have nourished mine."

Percy swallows again, feeling his surprise move like a snake down his throat, edging against Tom's finger, joined by another, in what would have been a caress by another person. Percy feels instead like it is a threat, Tom just seconds away from strangling him, and his heart beats erratically, though he is not frightened, and that confuses him even further in turn.

"Sleep now," commands Tom, his fingers tightening on Percy's throat, and Percy has the strange, intrusive thought that perhaps he will now die, and it will be all over, but he is still not frightened, and is in fact a bit relieved, like the thought of sinking into the cool river of his sheets to sleep after a warm and stressful day.

But Tom does not strangle him. What he does is even stranger, yet as it happens Percy has the singular thought that perhaps this has been inevitable, ever since Percy was pulled into the unstoppable flow of Tom's momentum, which has carried him into adulthood and shaped his life irrevocably. Tom leans down and brushes his lips against Percy's, and Percy's breath catches in his throat, at the feeling of Tom's body so close to his, and their shared awareness of that relentless magnetic pull, like Tom is a planet and Percy is his moon, circling endlessly around him, rising and setting but always there, and the dry cool sensation of Tom's mouth, its papery feel, a mouth that Percy had studied and perfectly copied onto a page, first by hand and then by paint and later by magic, and the oddness of Percy's own mouth below, suddenly two lips he has never encountered in his life, lips that are alien to him in this position against Tom's, a position so inevitable and yet so unexpected.

And then Tom lifts his head and brushes his hand over Percy's brow, and Percy feels the unmistakable drowsiness of enchanted sleep, and his words catch in his throat as he succumbs to it, his mind a riotous study of turmoil, even as it slinks away to oblivion.

CULMINATION (5/?)

Chapter Notes

> Absolutely blown away by the response to the last chapter. I guess all I needed to do to get you all out of hiding was to post a kiss....
>
> This arc just keeps going. I keep trying to cut out scenes and adding to them instead!!

CHAPTER ELEVEN: CULMINATION (5/?)

1997 — 1998 (Percy is 21 & 34, Severus is 36, Harry is 17, and Dumbledore no longer lives)

Percy awakes alone, of course, in his wide and clean bed. He wakes alone and he wakes suddenly, the spell slipping from his body cleanly and smoothly, and his eyes opening just seconds later. For several blissful seconds, Percy luxuriates in the false comfort of spell-induced sleep. His face, normally raw and puffy in the morning—head throbbing with latent exhaustion, a scream of self-pity rising in his throat, a hopeless lament against the unfairness of needing to emerge into yet another miserable day—is smooth when he reaches a finger to prod cautiously at the bags under his eyes.

Then, the memory.

Percy drops his hand as if burned by the thought of Tom's fingers where his had just been. His cheeks flame with agony. Oh, Merlin. That he'd so whimperingly whispered for Tom to take him home, that he'd let Tom all but *tuck him in* like he were a child, that he'd laid there like a maiden in an old tale while Tom leaned over him and—

—Percy propels himself out of bed, unable to bear even the *memory* of the events of last night. His blood cools slightly during a frigid shower, and he forgoes a hair-drying charm so that his head continues to feel cold as he tentatively makes his way into the other room.

Empty, thank Merlin.

Even the *sight* of the empty frame hanging in its prominent spot on the wall makes Percy blush again. He leaves without preparing his customary cup of coffee and plain bowl of porridge, though his stomach grumbles as he arrives in the Ministry, submitting tensely to the customary identity check before making his quick way to the Minister's office.

Empty, thank Merlin.

Well, Pius is there obediently, because Percy had commanded him to arrive each day at five in the morning and sit quietly until Percy arrived closer to six. But Pius in this state does not count as a person. Without even the traditional stirrings of guilt in his stomach at the sight of Pius' blank, empty eyes, Percy dispatches the Minister to patrol the halls, commanding him to go to all of the Department Heads' offices and stand silently in each doorway for thirty seconds before shaking his head and leaving, which hopefully will cause a frisson of discontent among the senior staff and also keep Pius out of Percy's hair.

Unfortunately, this leaves Percy alone in the office, and thus alone with his thoughts.

Burning, blushing, flaming cheeks. Percy cannot bear to think of it. Was he truly so desperate for Tom's attention? Did Tom think a kiss—a *kiss*—truly the best weapon to use on Percy? Why had Percy given him that impression? Was it true? It was a weapon, right? A calculated effort to ensure Percy's loyalty? Surely Tom had not…meant it, right?

Percy reaches for the notebook to inform Severus of what had occurred and then stops short, unable to even begin to articulate the earlier events of the day without thinking of the later ones. And Percy absolutely will not, could not, should not tell Severus that Tom had *kissed him.*

The thought of saying those words to Severus fills Percy with such a prolonged sense of panic that he slams the notebook closed and looks around him for a place to hide.

Focus, he roars at himself angrily, hating the way that his thoughts buzz agitatedly around his mind. His mental library, when he takes a peek in it, is in disarray, like the Hogwarts library in the days before the final exams, books half-open and strewn around the long wooden tables. He has to *focus*. They had made contact with Harry, revealed themselves to the Trio, found Draco Malfoy, and destroyed the diary, and Percy is focusing on what was undoubtedly an artless attempt at manipulation instead of any of those more pressing matters.

He spends the next hour focusing on these priorities: he writes a very brief summary for Severus, with an obvious set of omissions, of what had occurred; he leaves a note for Tonks, telling her that he'd seen Harry, who would hopefully now trust his earlier instruction to go to Andromeda, and also that Harry may think Percy possessed, which was far from the truth; and sends an order to the Ministry Library to reserve some books on famous Seers of England.

Then Tom comes nearly tumbling through the door, an expression of boyish excitement preceding him, and Percy flushes hotly and goes cold within seconds of each other.

But of course, Tom does not do anything as obscene as insinuate in any way that he wishes to kiss Percy again, though he stops when he sees Percy and bestows upon him a quick, silver smile. "Look," Tom says eagerly, snapping his fingers with a bit of his diary-self's theatrical flair.

Percy shivers, but this time because the temperature in the room plummets rapidly to below freezing. It is not a spell, but rather Tom's magic, leaping to do his bidding. After gasping past the initial shock of the chill, Percy can sense, like a great ancient glacier with its

swooping, razor-sharp lines hiding an immense mass of ice, the undercurrent of Tom's control.

"Merlin," he breathes, looking up at Tom with wide, impressed eyes, despite his earlier resolve to be professional and aloof. Tom has always had exquisite control of his magic, but this is something else entirely. “Tom, your *magic*... it’s…it’s changed.”

"I think I may be the most powerful wizard alive," says Tom, triumphantly, and Percy cannot even disagree. “My magic, of course…” Tom snaps his fingers again, and his magic roars in response, sending an icy breeze through the office, the curtains billowing like waves crashing onto shore, icicles crystalizing on the light fixtures. “But my *soul,* too.”

Percy flinches automatically, ready for some show of power to accompany the words, but nothing changes, despite Tom’s exultant expression. And now that some of his embarrassment has receded, he can think again of his realisation yesterday that Tom had not absorbed the diary’s *soul,* only its magic. But Tom must think he had taken the soul from the Horcrux into his own. He must think this heady rush of magic flowing through his veins is from soul and magical core both.

What does that mean for Percy?

Nothing, he supposes, watching Tom all but cavort around the office, demonstrating his newfound powers as giddily as a child in Fred and George’s shop. Nothing, except that perhaps Tom does have a blind spot, for all that Percy does not know how to exploit it.

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(Percy mourns the diary, in his own way, tracing his fingers over the faded photograph of Tom that he’d copied from the Hogwarts periodicals all those years ago, the knowing gleam in his eyes, the group of sycophant boys laughing obediently behind. His soul feels emptier; when he grips the stone tightly in his palm and soars over the tops of the great fir trees to land at the Astronomy Tower, it feels cold, and empty, and alien to him without Tom’s misty form.

But his soul still casts shadows. But when he walks through Hogwarts, slowly, deliberately, trailing a hand over the bannisters like he’d used to, even back in his Head Boy days, something still lurks behind the quiet creaking of the stairs. Something like discontent, something like unhappiness.

Yet he cannot find it, even as he commands his soul to shine lights into the dusty and dim corners, even as he returns again to the blistered stone marking Fred’s final joke. Something is still *wrong*, but now that he knows it is not Tom, he supposes it can only be himself.)

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Despite Percy's instructions to Tonks, he does not hear from her, nor Andromeda, nor any of the four errant teenagers now careening undeniably toward the end of the war, one way or another. When Percy forces himself to re-watch the memory of those critical final moments, he'd been oddly touched by the way that Ron had stepped quickly to his side, brushing off Hermione's attempt to restrain him. But then Percy has to flinch at the possessive expression that crossed Tom's face in response. Perhaps he ought not to be surprised that the Trio has not contacted him, perhaps believing him controlled by a Horcrux. Undoubtedly it had been as odd of a day for them as they were likely to have.

But only two days after he writes to Severus, the other man finds a way to summon him to Hogwarts, ostentatiously to discuss that Ginny has disappeared from the grounds, but more pointedly to hear the events of the past few days.

Percy will have to make some excuse to the Dark Lord, he supposes, for his sister's behaviour. Severus tells him, ensconced in a room in the Three Broomsticks—Percy is trying not to think of Madam Rosmerta's accusing glare, and the way she handed over the key with more force than was strictly necessary, and her once-pretty face lined with worry and resentment—that he is fairly certain that Ginny and the rest of them are hiding in some protected spot of the castle, perhaps a chamber of Gryffindor's, or a classroom they'd managed to thoroughly enchant. They have clearly not left the grounds; instead of attending their classes, they seem to be taking a rather more extracurricular approach to their learning, making things difficult for the Carrows, who are nearly blind with anger as they attempt to ferret out the hiding students.

"In truth, I am trying not to know where they are," Severus says quietly, and Percy nods in understanding. Every piece of knowledge that they carry in their mental shields weighs more heavily on their minds, exposing them to risk, a hook for their Unbreakable Vows to catch on during torture. *Ginny makes it through this war alive*, Percy tells himself, as do most of the other students who are presumably in hiding with her. "Now tell me. Your message was not —complete."

Percy flushes automatically, despite himself. Severus eyes him carefully and then sits up more alertly, his brow furrowing, as he reads some truth on Percy's face. Percy's blush intensifies at the intimacy of having Severus' full attention on him, roving over his face, his tortoise-shell glasses, the zit on his nose that he'd assiduously hid with a layered Glamour charm.

"Well," Percy begins awkwardly. *First steps first.* "Tom forced a confrontation between the diary, which was, *as I had said*, with Harry, and fully alive."

He stops, his flush continuing to the tips of his ears but releasing his cheeks from its hostage. Severus acknowledges the point with a gentle dip of his head. The gesture is oddly soothing to Percy, who feels some of his earlier anger at Severus' lack of trust dissipating into the wind. "As you'd suspected."

“I…suggested to Tom that he use their magic to decide, which of the two soul fragments ought to be….dominant.”

“And the…other Tom agreed to this plan?” Severus says in surprise.

Percy hesitates and then nods, thinking how Tom had seemed to know the suggestion was coming. “I believed the diary thought it a foregone conclusion that he win any confrontation of magic,” Percy says thoughtfully. “As the first Horcrux, it has the most powerful fragment of soul.”

Severus frowns. “Yet the other Tom won.”

“It was a battle of *magic,”* Percy explains slowly, trying to put into words the strange, brittle confrontation and Percy’s sudden flash of understanding. “Their magic recognised each other, but Tom—the diadem-Tom—had more control over his, and he was able to overpower the diary.”

Severus leans back and regards Percy thoughtfully. “But you suspect it was not a battle of their souls.”

“Tom’s soul—the diary-Tom—was…sheltering in mine, I suppose,” Percy says awkwardly, unable to describe their connection without using Tom’s words, and thereby calling to mind the events that had followed. “I felt Tom snapping the connection between us, and I felt when the diary’s soul was destroyed. It released quite a lot of magic, which Tom absorbed into himself.”

“And you believe this significant?” Severus asks shrewdly.

Caught, Percy coughs out a quiet laugh, searching for the right words. “He thinks he absorbed the diary’s soul, but he only absorbed its magic. I am not precisely sure what that means for us, but it feels important.”

Severus is quiet, considering the implication of what Percy had said. Percy falls into silence as well, examining Severus, who looks, as always, tired and grim. His face is so different than Tom’s, so much older, and yet in a curious way, so much more alive. At times, Tom still reminds Percy of a painting, the strokes of his face called deliberately into being, rather than organically rendered. “I will defer to you,” Severus says finally, surprising Percy, who adjusts his glasses nervously. Severus scowls at the gesture and elaborates, “As your understanding of soul magic is…considerably more advanced than mine.”

Percy opens his mouth to disagree. Severus raises an eyebrow, and Percy sheepishly closes his mouth. For Severus to say such a thing is a precious gift, and Percy will not scorn it by disagreeing without cause.

Perhaps Severus is right. Perhaps Percy’s understanding of soul magic *is* more advanced than Severus’, and Tom’s, and McGonagall’s too. It is an odd thought, to see himself standing in line with these giants of his life, and it makes his stomach churn uncomfortably with a combination of anxiety and pride.

“The locket is with Andromeda, and I hope I sent Harry there, though I have heard nothing,” Percy continues. “Oh, and Draco is with them too, presumably of his own accord.”

“Tom did not confront Potter then?” Severus asks curiously, though his face registers surprise at the belated news that his godson is now in league with Harry Potter. “Nor followed him to the locket?”

Percy can’t help it; he flushes again, hating his skin and his light complexion, and wondering if there is a spell he can employ to keep his body temperature regulated. "I was affected negatively by the confrontation with Tom," Percy says weakly, looking over Severus' right shoulder to avoid the force of his gaze. "I told him I needed to come home. He was… *concerned* about me."

"I see."

The silence produced by these words is unbearable. Percy reluctantly drags his eyes back to Severus', only to find the other man's expression inscrutable. Perhaps Severus can glean what then followed by the pink tinge of Percy's cheeks; perhaps he is imagining something far more sordid and unimaginable; perhaps he is merely calculating how to best use this information to his advantage.

But ultimately Severus says nothing, only clearing his throat and changing the topic neatly to that of the prophecy that the Dark Lord has repeatedly demanded they bring him. "So when we destroy the locket, which you said in your message requires Parseltongue, we will contend only with Potter, Tom, and the Dark Lord. Do you still think it wise to encourage the Dark Lord to directly attack Potter?"

"Do you?" Percy says, voice tinged with petulant anxiety. "I thought you said that Dumbledore has insisted on it."

"So he has," concedes Severus, "and I believe he hopes such a confrontation will destroy the Horcrux within the boy without harming the boy thus. Do you think this likely?"

"Well, presumably by now Harry has beaten Draco in a duel," Percy says contemplatively. He does not know how, precisely, Draco won the Trio's trust and joined their journey, but he cannot imagine it occurred without a duel. "Or perhaps we can arrange one if needed. We have the Elder Wand to give to Harry. He has the Cloak, presumably. I do not know about the Resurrection Stone, but we must assume that if Dumbledore truly planned for Harry to command the Hallows, he would have given it…to…him."

Percy trails off, his stomach clenching in dread, as he remembers something important.

"The will," he breathes out, looking at Severus with wide, panicked eyes. "Perhaps the items in the will were meant to lead Harry to the Stone."

"Do you have these items?"

Percy starts and nods, digging into his ubiquitous bookbag for his moleskine pouch, which has a nifty resizing charm on it that expands its capacity. He withdraws the items: the book,

the Snitch, the little Muggle toy. Severus picks up each in turn, examining them silently, though he seems to come to the same conclusion as Percy had; none were magical objections, at least not inherently, the Snitch no longer animated, the toy nothing more than cool metal against their palms. This last seems to fascinate Severus; he picks it up gingerly and spends a very long time staring at it, his expression complex, as if it speaks to some memory of his long-forgotten, perhaps a childhood memory in an unhappy Muggle home. Percy takes the book to shield himself.

But then, as Percy flips carefully through the book of myths, a memory: his mother, in the downstairs room, sitting in the large, squishy red armchair that Percy had secretly loved so dearly. His brothers, gathered around, in their established order: Percy and Charlie on the couch, Bill perched smoothly on the armrest, Fred and George leaning against Percy and Charlie's knees, and the two youngest on pillows on the rug, closest to the fire. Their father in the corner, tinkering softly with some Muggle invention. All attention on their mother, her voice animated as she takes on voices for each character, at times adding her magic to the mix, so that a spark of light flashes as a wizard casts a spell, or a puff of smoke startles Ginny and Ron, who clutch at each other fearfully.

A particular story that Percy had never liked, so he'd never requested it. Three brothers, a bridge, an image of Death like a large, scary Dementor, extending a scaly hand.

"Severus," he says slowly.

Severus does not respond at first, still cradling the silver Muggle toy like it is precious, or perhaps hated.

"Severus," Percy repeats, with more volume. At Severus' inquisitive gaze, he turns the book around, thinking of Bathilda Bagshot, and her surprise that he'd not heard of the Hallows, and a grave in cemetery, lying besides generations of Dumbledores and Peverells and the parents of the Boy Who Lived.

"What are you showing me?" Severus asks impatiently, scanning the page, as Death reaches up to the elder tree.

"The Hallows," Percy says, taken aback. "*Tales of Beedle the Bard.*"

Severus' voice is laced with impatience. "I do not know this book."

"*Tales of* —oh." Horrid Muggle childhood indeed. Percy is briefly embarrassed by his presumption, but he shakes it off long enough to say, "It is a story of the Hallows, though I did not think of it at first. My mother used to read it to us as children. If Ron were to read this book again, he would remember, and perhaps Hermione would think to wonder if they were real, given Harry's cloak. This must be what Dumbledore intended to pass on to them."

"We must give these gifts to them," Severus says, setting the silver item with some reluctance on the table.

"What is that?" Percy asks, nodding to it. "Dumbledore left it to my brother."

“It is a Deluminator. It removes light from a location and stores it for use. I have seen Dumbledore use it often.” Severus anticipates Percy’s next question and says quickly, “I do not know why Dumbledore wanted Ronald to have it. Perhaps for the cave, so that they may remove the lights that may awaken the Inferi. I believe the true gift is, as you said, the book of stories; the Snitch and the Deluminator are merely decoys.”

They need to find Harry again anyway, though without the diary, Percy is not sure how to best achieve this goal. Regardless, he nods and packs away the things carefully, asking as he does so, “But the Resurrection Stone, it is still missing.”

“We must assume that Potter already has it, or knows how to get it,” Severus says with a heavy sigh. “The Hallows are not our concern; we are merely conjecturing that Potter needs them for his task. Perhaps the boy must die, and to have hope otherwise is fruitless. It brings us back to my original query: if the Dark Lord is to kill the boy, then whichever of he and Tom win their inevitable confrontation will be ours to defeat.”

“I do not think it wise to have them face off now, if that is what you are implying,” says Percy, shaking his head. “Tom has become far more powerful magically than he was, by absorbing the diary’s magic. I think we need to let the prophecy come to play and then evaluate our next move. Whichever of them survives will be mortal, if the Horcrux within Harry is defeated as well. At that point…”

Severus nods soberly. “So we must continue to instil in the Dark Lord’s mind that he must try and defeat the boy before anything else. And we must convince the boy that he ought to go to his death willingly.”

“He will,” says Percy softly. “If we tell him that there is no other choice. The Dark Lord will be eager to defeat Harry, if Harry appears and is vulnerable. So we must only convince Tom that it is in his best interest to wait.”

“I can manage the Dark Lord.” Severus looks steadily at Percy. “You must contain Tom. Distract him with whatever tools are at your disposal. It will take time for us to find Potter and use him to destroy the locket.”

Percy nods, the tips of his ears flaming red yet again. Certainly Severus does not know what he had just implied to Percy, and so Percy will carefully not think of it. To distract them both, he says impulsively, “Which of the Hallows would you want, if you were offered them?”

“The Wand,” says Severus, as if it were obvious. “To speak to the dead, while…enticing…” he trails off, and the shadow of Lily hovers between them before he shakes his head to clear it. “The Wand, so that I may have power unchallenged. And you?”

Percy thinks having unconquerable power, of being able to speak to death, and then of Tom’s gaze, fierce and arresting and inevitable. “The Invisibility Cloak,” he says quietly. “So that I may disappear.”

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Percy risks another letter to Bill, several months after his last.

William, he writes carefully, hoping that Bill still understands the cue,

Have you heard from Ron? I am worried about him. Ginny has disappeared from Hogwarts. They are purebloods; they have nothing to fear. I want to ensure they are safe.

Percival

But Bill does not reply, either. Where in Merlin's name did these teenagers *go*? Did they not know how to get to Andromeda's house? Surely that would not be a task too difficult for the four of them. Or had they told Andromeda something so shocking about Percy that they had elected not to trust him any further?

Distracting Tom, at least, is an easier task. Percy dares him to do harder and harder feats of magic: to see how many items he can Levitate simultaneously, to Summon large boulders from many metres away, to test the boundaries of a Reparo charm on porcelain dust, shattered carefully by an applied Exploding charm. First year tests, Hogwarts tests, but tests that entertain Tom, just as Percy had thought they might.

Nothing is said about the kiss, of course. Percy has begun to think that he'd imagined it, somewhere in the fevered drowsiness of his mind. That his thoughts may have conjured such a thing of their own accord is, of course, unthinkable, and so Percy chooses not to think of it, when he can.

(Not to think of the kiss, or how dizzy and intoxicated Percy sometimes feels, so close to Tom's magic, as if his mind is not his own, as if his body is controlled by another. No, there are many things that Percy does not think of, carefully and deliberately.)

But despite the fact that neither wizard mentions the kiss, that moment of weakness, there are other moments that are—uncomfortably confusing, if not agonisingly intimate.

Like the *gifts* that Tom acquires for Percy, acquires being the operative word, since Tom steals them without any shame. Some items, like the dragonhide wallet with a clever animation charm on an engraved dragon, he silently pickpockets from the target with a silent, deadly Summoning charm. Others, like the set of pure gold goblets inlaid with shimmering crystals, he takes from whatever residence he is in for his own private, untold reasons. Tom does not present these to Percy explicitly as presents; he brings them to the flat as spoils of war but leaves them there in Percy's possession. Percy quickly learns that the way to avert an extended sulk is to loudly praise the gifts upon their giving and display them prominently thereafter.

Or the *walks* that Percy now takes with Tom, who seems to exult in his own body in a way that Percy—for whom exercise is a nuisance, or more often an obligation—does not fully understand. But when Tom discovers that Percy has begun walking most of the way home after work, enjoying the quiet, still night and the hordes of blissfully ignorant Muggles, he

begins to join him, and they walk next to each other in such a way that Percy is intently aware of the proximity of their hands.

"What does it feel like, to absorb another soul into yours?" Percy asks quietly on one of these walks, the silence between them looming so large that Percy feels compelled to break it. He mustn't suggest to Tom that he'd absorbed only magic, not soul, but Percy cannot help but be curious.

Tom is silent until a Muggle couple, pausing to smile at each other's faces under the warm pool of light cast by the brass Muggle light post, passes by them. Percy had been initially hesitant about telling Tom about his route, but Tom watches the Muggles more curiously than hatefully.

"It feels as if I could breathe more clearly," says Tom after a long, thoughtful pause. "As if a pressure on my chest has been relieved. I feel more powerful, of course; I can feel my magic all throughout my body."

"And you feel stronger."

"*Worlds* stronger," breathes Tom, almost reverently. "The diary, it was a stronger soul piece than the snake. The animal's soul was interfering, I believe."

"Do animals have souls?" Percy asks curiously. Certainly he's not heard of animals fleeing from Dementors.

Tom wrinkles his nose. "Of a sort. A bit like Muggles, I think."

Percy considers this. Continuing to use Dementors as a metric for whether something has a soul, he supposes that Muggles cannot even see the creatures. Do Dementors harm Muggles?

"So you believe only magical creatures have a soul?"

"Of course," Tom says, pityingly. "Percy, I know you are not as familiar with soul magic as I, but this ought to be obvious. Our souls are nothing more than our magical cores."

"But—" Percy begins, frowning, his steps slowing as he considers this. Despite his desire to engage Tom in conversation only to determine what he knows, Percy finds himself unable to resist the intellectual argument. "That doesn't make sense. Our magical cores grow and strengthen as we practise magic."

"And why wouldn't our souls grow the same way?" Tom asks, raising an eyebrow.

And Percy has to admit, it makes a certain amount of sense. The soul splits at death, and magic is released—enough magic to break the bond of a Dementor. A soul is created at birth, and somehow magic is trapped from the world and concentrated in the child. Why wouldn't a soul merely be a receptacle of magic?

Because you've walked through yours, a voice in his head whispers. *Because you know that Muggles have souls, and so do Squibs. Because a wizard can lose its soul but still be a magical being.*

"I suppose," Percy says doubtfully. Something inside him is still screaming *no* at the idea that souls, in all their complexity, are nothing more than magical cores. But he cannot verbalise precisely what a soul would be instead. "Do you believe it will continue to scale, then? If you were to find the locket?"

Tom looks curiously at Percy but answers, "I am planning to keep the locket as a Horcrux, so that it may protect me from harm. I have a form, and magic, and power. Even if the boy were to defeat Him, he would die, as you've said before."

Percy nods slowly. "Do you think the boy has the locket?"

"No," says Tom, surprisingly calmly. "I did not sense it on him. I believe it is still with Sirius Black, in the Black family home. It is no matter; he will not be able to destroy it. I am patient, Percy. I will retrieve it when it is time."

"I see." Percy would be willing to posit that Tom would decide it time to fetch the locket shortly after the Dark Lord was dead. "Well, can you do any new types of magic?"

"It's not a question of *type*, rather of *strength*," Tom begins to explain, though he falls silent in the middle of his comment as another pair of Muggles pass them. "Honestly, Percy. You really ought to move. How do you stand this? It's like a zoo."

"I like my flat," Percy defends. When Tom gives a scornful smirk, Percy bristles. Searching for something positive to say about his flat, he settles on, "It's the first thing I've ever had that's—mine."

Tom's face registers surprise, and perhaps even understanding, which simmers in the space between them. "You were not happy as a child," he says quietly, turning to face Percy. The night is particularly dark, the sky an inky black, swathed under a low ridge of heavy, glacial clouds, the suggestion of snow nipping at Percy's nose and ears. It is the type of night where Percy cannot tell if his chest is cold due to Tom's magic or the relentless freezing of the world each night, only temporarily beat back by the wan sun each morning. "Are you unhappy now?"

Percy's instinct is *no*. He then thinks about it more fully, weighs this miserable life against the last, and then opens his mouth and says, "No. But I am not—happy, either."

"What are you?"

"Tired, I think," Percy says honestly. "But I feel I am…working toward my own goals. Working for myself, rather than a master."

"Even though the Dark Lord commands you?" Tom asks shrewdly. "Even though you are working to help me regain my power?"

Percy gives a helpless shrug, unable to continue to meet Tom's gaze. He looks instead up at the sky, though the moon is nearly hidden behind the thick, heavy clouds. Percy knows Severus well enough by now to know that Severus resents the Dark Lord's orders as much as he did Dumbledore's, though he'd likely say it was for a different reason. Harry likely resents

the Dark Lord, too, and Hermione, and Ron, and Draco. And the Dark Lord is the reason that Landon is dead, and the reason that Percy's classmates live in fear, and the reason that Percy has become so intimately familiar with both sides of a Cruciatus curse.

But the Dark Lord is the reason that Percy is here, too. He is the reason that Percy ended his old life with a twist of golden dust, carefully extracted from one of the remaining Time Turners found in the back of the Library of Archives. The utter, all-encompassing conviction that the Dark Lord needs to be defeated is at the centre of all of Percy's decisions, even as Percy begins to understand the Dark Lord better, and pities him, and empathises with his decisions.

Percy has never had that kind of clarity, not in his last life. In this life, Percy is so proximate to power that he sees it all unfold in front of him, which makes him feel often hopeless—but sometimes it makes him feel that he is his own master, and his goals are his own, and his power is at his own command.

"The second goal obviates the pressure of the first," Percy says, instead of trying to explain all of that to Tom, who he can't imagine ever understanding not having conviction in himself. "Helping you has helped me discover a version of myself that I liked, or at least that I could respect. I've never…I've never had that before."

Tom's look in return feels as intimate as the kiss, and as searing, and as poignant, when Percy thinks of it later, absently tracing his fingers over one of the golden goblets that shimmers with trapped candlelight.

But still Percy does not feel *scared*, though he supposes perhaps he should.

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They are having the funeral anyway, Percy writes to Severus several days later, pressing his quill savagely into the page. A crumpled invitation lays next to him, singed at the tips from where Percy's magic produced an accidental surge of anger. *I **warned** Henry. But he will not listen.*

You should inform Him.

I can't inform Him!

He will find out anyway.

Percy thinks of a young Greengrass boy, staring up at the Dark Lord with awe in his eyes, and another boy with the same expression in front of a House ghost. He chokes back a sob. Tobias had tried, but Landon would have been safer with Henry and his lot, proud purebloods that nevertheless remained Light wizards, or the very least neutral ones. *So I must betray them too?*

Warn Tobias. Do not attend the raid yourself. It will be…difficult for you to bear. You must not risk it.

He will want me to attend.

The second that the Dark Lord learns that Percy is informing on the illicit actions of his old classmates, he will gleefully, cruelly order Percy to attend and even cast a killing blow with his own hands.

Are Minerva and Filius invited to the funeral? If not, you should forge them invitations.

Why?

I will tell the Dark Lord that we will take advantage of their absence to interrogate Trelawney, in case she may be the Seer we seek. Then you need not attend the funeral, but the Dark Lord will not risk attacking with both Minerva and Filius present.

Percy blinks at Severus' dark, spiky handwriting but responds, *So you have decided to pin it on her?*

He will find it believable.

Percy thinks dubiously of the three years of Divination he had taken, of Trelawney's smoky rooms and plushy couches. He does not think she had ever successfully predicted anything of note during his time in her class, though she did delight in predicting harm for a student on the first day of class each year. She had never noticed Percy, largely because Percy kept his head down and studiously ignored the majority of what she tried to teach them.

Severus, perhaps sensing Percy's doubt, continues to write. *She is related to Cassandra Trewlaney, the famous Seer. Unless you have an alternate suggestion?*

No, Percy writes guiltily, thinking of the books he'd gotten from the library but not read. *But I believe I have finalised the alternate text after your last revision.*

This will accelerate matters. Likely we will have only days to arrange a confrontation between those involved once we show the Dark Lord the prophecy.

Percy brushes his fingers over the ink, knowing what it is that Severus is implying. To destroy the locket is at least nominally in their grasp, but they had not yet decided how to destroy Tom, when the time comes.

Let us create the memory. Then we will have it at our disposal when necessary.

Having a plan makes it easier to stomach some of the news plastered over the *Daily Prophet* as January slips into February, and February begins its inexorable campaign toward March. News like Tobias continuing to insist on having a public funeral for his son despite Percy's risky letter of warning. Other news like Susan Bones tracking down her aunt's murderer and attempting to kill him, only to be seriously cursed herself in the process. And, most worrying, news that Lucius Malfoy has been sighted in the country, a flash of blonde hair at Gringotts, which sends the Dark Lord into an incoherent rage at the next Death Eater meeting.

“I wonder why he has returned,” says Tom thoughtfully. Percy shrugs silently; Tonks had asked him the same question when Percy had relayed the sighting, but there was no way to posit Lucius’ motivations without speaking of the Elder Wand. “He must believe he has found something worthy of inciting *His* wrath.”

But the Dark Lord does not tell Percy, nor does Lucius appear at any Death Eater meetings, though they are all very aware of his alleged presence in the country. Percy silently lingers after meetings and smiles noncommittally at all of the men he’d grown used to over these past months, and his reward is the unsettling knowledge that many of them *would* follow Lucius, if Lucius could credibly defeat the Dark Lord.

Lucius is familiar to them, after all; the Dark Lord’s harsh, elemental magic and impenetrable private goals are confusing and worrying to most of the purebloods who were expecting something more akin to their favoured friend being appointed Minister than such a violent reign. Lucius plays the same games that they do in the Ministry, his son is friends with their sons (though, of course, Draco is still mysteriously missing, presumed to be abroad as well), and his magic, while Dark, is a *familiar* sort of Dark, Dark out of a mixture of family loyalty and childish defiance to the status quo, in the same way that Auntie Muriel practises the Old Ways despite her niece’s disapproval.

It worries Percy not because he believes that Lucius *has* come back to challenge the Dark Lord. The more likely reason for Lucius’ return is that he found something of note in whatever foreign country he spirited himself away to, perhaps wind of a rebellion, or a friendly or spineless Minister who may support the Dark Lord’s increasing reign.

Tom worries Percy. Tom worries Percy even more now that he has disposed of the diary and absorbed some of his youthful demeanour in addition to his magic. Percy cannot say whether Tom has become more cheerful because the way to power has become ever more clear or because he took on some of Tom’s memories too. Either way, Percy finds himself in the odd position of meeting what feels like a fourth version of Tom; a Tom that Percy may have met at his age in the Ministry, a Tom that might have elected to go abroad to do the same curse breaking program with Bill, a Tom who is undeniably powerful and undeniably charismatic.

Percy has never seen Tom interact with another person, so he cannot be sure whether this version of Tom is the version of Tom that everyone would see, or if Percy, for some reason beyond his understanding, is being delivered this version of Tom deliberately, whether out of trust or artifice. Regardless of why, Percy is worried, and it gnaws at his stomach.

Tom *smiles* at him. Tom smirks at him and grins at him and laughs at him, far more openly than any version of Tom that Tom has ever known, even his sixteen year old self, who was far more guarded. Tom teaches him still, as all versions of Tom, magics and spells and tricks of awareness that Percy learns obediently and practises at home. But Tom also *talks* to him, shares more of his personal background than Percy would have ever believed he willing to share. He speaks of that first year at Hogwarts, how he’d struggled with wand-magic, so used to the instinctive flow of his power throughout his body; of the slight he’d felt when even Slughorn had not asked him to be his apprentice, despite the many hours of Slug Club Tom had forced himself to attend; and of the indignity of working at Borgin and Burkes with two

elderly, condescending wizards barely worth a second of Tom's attention, had they not had access to some of the rarest Dark artefacts of the time.

So yes, Tom worries him, but Percy is self-aware (reluctantly, quietly, forcefully) enough to understand that what *really* worries him is not how easy it would be for this Tom to take control of the Death Eaters, despite what he writes to Severus when he relates his fears, but that Percy finds himself *enjoying* Tom's company in a way he'd never before.

It feels finally like they are equals, like Tom has noticed him, and Percy basks in it, even as he castigates himself for the weakness. He must not forget that Tom would still kill him at a moment's notice (right?) if Percy ever stood in his way. He must not forget that Tom is the Dark Lord, or a version of him, and a land ruled by Tom was not necessarily—better.

Percy is so confused that he is almost relieved when the time comes to meet Severus, even if their task will undoubtedly be unpleasant. As the months go on, Percy finds to his surprise that he quite likes Severus as a friend too, but this, at least, makes him feel strangely proud of himself, rather than guilty or ashamed. To have won the esteem of the ferocious Severus Snape—this is one anecdote that Percy would wish he could tell his younger self, or his other self, to motivate him to continue down the path he'd so impulsively chosen.

Severus, of course, does not show any similar signs of relief when the day arrives. When Severus arrives at their agreed upon meeting place to Apparate Percy into Hogwarts, he is brusque and short, pausing only to verify Percy's identity with the name of his first girlfriend —Penelope—before whisking Percy away from the small park near the Ministry.

They arrive in Snape's private quarters, and Percy has only a few seconds to register a large bed made with white linens opposite a stately oak chest of drawers before Severus takes an iron grip on his arm and covers him with a strong Disillusionment Charm. They do not speak as they make their quick way through the castle, using a series of passageways that Percy has never seen, but seem to melt open at Severus' touch. Only when they are safely ensconced within Trelawney's rooms does Severus relax, though only marginally, and remove the charm from Percy's person.

"Together?" Severus asks shortly.

Percy nods. Now that he is here, back inside Hogwarts, the memories of Landon threaten to overwhelm. Percy had been trying not to think about Landon, about how Percy had failed him, about how Landon's only crime was curiosity and a surprising streak of moral fibre. Percy had been particularly trying not to think of a letter from Sonali that he'd luckily managed to intercept before it reached Tom or any other Death Eater, which Percy has not had the courage to open. It now lays beside a similar letter sent by Tobias, and one by Mariana. Percy can imagine what each contains and so he does not force himself to confront their realities. If he wants to save any of them now, he has to continue moving forward with intention and not succumb to sentimentality.

Severus and Percy had planned to both be in the memory after some argument; there were arguments to be made on both sides, but eventually neither could justify how Percy would have broken into Hogwarts without Severus' help, nor why Severus would then leave Percy to confront Trelawney alone.

“It’s got to be her,” Percy says gruffly, hoping he sounds believable. “I’ve been practising the Legilimency.” The weekend prior, Percy had staged what he hopes will be months of memories of him researching different Seers in Britain, trying not to think of Landon’s body under the preserving charm, soon to be interred. Landon would have loved this type of subterfuge, staging fake research, dipping in and out of the Library of Archives.

He’d brought twelve different robes and changed into them every hour, making sure to disturb the stacks of books around him or the colour of the mug from which he drinks tea. He thought even to change the light streaming in through the enchanted windows. Each time he cleared up, went outside, changed, and re-entered, he’d thanked Merlin that the replacement Librarian was of a less conscientious breed than his Muggleborn predecessor and therefore was at home instead of monitoring his library carefully.

“When Dumbledore hired her, I examined her carefully,” Severus snaps back, as if offended at the implication that he may have missed something. “She knows nothing of a prophecy.”

“She *remembers* nothing.”

“I’ve never heard of this branch of Legilimency either. Memory magic is notoriously vague. You are sure of the veracity of the memories produced with this method? You cannot be sure that you are creating memories that your mind wishes to see.”

“I’ve been researching memory magic for years,” Percy hisses back, disgruntled. It would not do for the Dark Lord to think that Percy’s loyalty to his old professor is greater than that of his loyalty to his new lord. “You’ve never thought anything I do is good enough. You’re just jealous you didn’t think of this first.”

“Stay your pride, boy. I merely want what is best for our Lord. We are at the point of the war where even a small misstep can have disastrous consequences.” Severus gives one final glower to Percy and then raises his voice. “Sybill, a word.”

Sybill Trelawney clearly does not possess a Knut of the Sight, for she obediently comes when Severus calls and blanches in surprise to see Percy. “Mr. Weasley,” she wavers, her eyes large and bug-like behind her glasses. “What is it that I can help you with?”

“Surely you ought to know?” Percy asks rudely, raising an eyebrow. He had taken two years of Divination and found the subject only vaguely interesting; there are legitimate Seers, and there are legitimate prophecies, but the talent seems to be inexplicably passed down by blood, and therefore cannot be replicated by study. He had enjoyed it as a history lesson, learning about some of the famous prophecies of the past, but had never seen even a glimmer in the corner of his crystal ball.

“You come seeking answers…”

“An excellent deduction, given that I would be here either to arrest you for illegally maintaining residence in Hogwarts, or seeking answers,” says Percy with a scoff. “Sit. I have need of your memories."

“My…memories?” Trelawney says weakly, though at a stern look from Severus she takes a precarious seat on one of the large, overstuffed armchairs she favours, sinking into it nearly entirely, so that the voluminous purple fabric seems to swallow her up like a flower encasing a bug. “I assure you, Mr. Weasley, if I had any memories of note, *Headmaster Snape* would have already ripped them from my mind.”

Severus stiffens, and Trelawney gives a cackle that smells strongly of vodka. “Oh, yes. You think I have not noticed you rippling through my memories for the last decade, Severus? Very curious, you are, to see what I may hold within my mind. But those of us with the Sight will never give up our secrets, not to intruders…”

Percy gives a quelling glare to Severus, who seems ready to curse Trelawney. In a way, this helps protect him from the Dark Lord’s inevitable criticism; Severus can say that he repeatedly tried to see if Trelawney had anything to hide.

Percy points his wand directly at Trelawney’s face and says briskly, “This won’t hurt a bit. *Legilimens.”*

At the same time, Severus silently casts an Imperious Curse, and Percy finds himself in the odd and unique experience of entering someone’s mind as they are being controlled by someone else.

Trelawney’s mind looks rather like her chambers: a dark, colourful room, stuffed to the brim with odds and ends and little instruments shooting off smoke and glowing crystals scattered on ornate wooden surfaces. Percy coughs, somewhere back in his body, finding the incense smell of her room somehow permeating through her mind. It is not chaotic, he supposes, not entirely disordered; she clearly has some background in Occlumency, or some crackpot version of it. But she is hardly an expert on defences, and so Percy finds it easy to navigate through her mind once he settles his vertigo.

Absently, he hears Severus’ voice echoing through her mind. *Tell us the following as if it were a prophecy* …he commands. *The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches…*

Percy finds a likely looking crystal, glowing an emerald green like Harry’s eyes, and closes his fingers around it in her mind. This next bit will be difficult; he yanks at it and releases enough of his magic that it begins to vibrate in her mind, as if he were trying to access it by force. At the same time, he expels himself from her mind, still clutching the gem, as if bringing it to the forefront by force. But there’s something about that gem, something strange, something that vibrates in Percy’s mind, though he does not allow himself to linger on his suspicions. A second later, Severus changes his Imperius curse, so that Trelawney’s eyes roll back in her head and she begins to incant their fake prophecy.

(Watching the memory later, Percy has to admit a small sense of pride at the showmanship that he and Severus managed together. It looks remarkably like their shared efforts forced a repressed memory to surface.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his

equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and the Dark Lord should beware, for if they are to duel, the elder will perish at the hands of the younger…yet the one who is sacrificed will be the one destroyed…the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies...."

Only after they perform the requisite tasks— *Obliviating* Trelawney, exchanging a few additional barbs, and planning the construction of the memory orb—do they return silently to Severus' chambers, Percy by lynx to add an extra layer of protection. Percy catches a scent that feels familiar to him, but he ignores it; if Ginny *is* in the castle still, likely her smell is lingering on the stones, but he will do her no favours to draw attention to it.

"I saw something strange in Trelawney's mind," Percy says immediately upon returning to a form. "I think she has heard the prophecy before."

"What?" Severus says in surprise, the pale green of his privacy wards still fading from his wand. "Our revised version?"

"No," Percy insists, thinking of the jagged edges of the green crystal in her mind. "She's heard the real one before."

Understanding passes between them in a heartbeat. Percy finds himself standing between Severus and the door, his wand raised. "Severus, *no."*

"Still yourself," says Severus, with a strange, brittle smile, like one carved out of ice, or sculpted from stone like a gargoyle's. "I have suspected for many years, though Albus never confirmed her identity for me."

Percy gapes at Severus, feeling oddly humiliated for the other man, forced to work side by side with the most visible of his mistakes. "And Dumbledore allowed her to *work* here?"

This is the wrong question to ask. Severus' face sours immediately, his skin sallow and his expression angry. "Yes." Severus bites out the word, which falls between them like a heavy stone into a lake.

"And she does not remember?"

Severus stretches out the word, filling it with his anger. "Evidently."

"So perhaps Dumbledore thought she may give another prophecy," Percy says thoughtfully, both because he believes it may be true, and also to distract Severus, who is beginning to look quite upset. "Did she?"

"He would not tell me." Percy shivers as Severus' dark rage builds. His magic feels, appropriately, like a poison brewing on the fire, the flames beginning to be unbearably hot, and an acrid smell burning the back of Percy's throat. "He knew what she may do and allowed her safe passage in Hogwarts."

"Severus, it *wasn't her fault*," Percy tries, holding his hands out in warning. "True Seers cannot control the prophecies, nor when they say them. It is not as if Dumbledore would

have…incited further prophecy, merely by hiring her as a professor."

Severus turns to Percy, then, and Percy takes an unconscious step back at the raw pain and sorrow so clearly brewing in Severus' eyes. "But Seers do not give prophecies without cause," the other wizard whispers, and suddenly his magic swells and drops, as if he'd applied a careful cooling charm to the side of the cauldron. "It is the paradox of prediction; a true Seer will give a prophecy only when someone instrumental to its telling is near."

Percy frowns, turning this over in his head. He does not remember that from the Divination O.W.L., nor from his recent bout of research. "Are you sure?" A second later, he concludes this is a very stupid line of inquiry, given that Severus had more cause than most to become intimately familiar in how a prophecy is given. "Never mind," he says hastily. "So you are saying that Dumbledore forced the prophecy out of her?"

"*Dumbledore* was merely interviewing her for a position at his school," Severus says hoarsely. The dark lines of his body seem to crumple and fold, like a feather drifting through a snow-bank, blanketed by the crisp white lines of his large bed behind. "It was I who created a situation out of the ordinary. It was I who spied on them to hear her knowledge. It was I who brought the prophecy into being."

Percy does the only thing he can do. He takes a gentle step toward Severus and touches his arm hesitantly, leading him to the bed, and guiding him to sit. Percy wastes a second hesitating on where to take his own seat before he gives it up as a lost cause and settles tentatively beside, indexing with surprise the warmth of the other man's thigh pressed against his own, odd but oddly calming. "Hush," he says, like his mother coming to his bedside after a night terror. He would smooth Severus' brow if he didn't think that would result in his immediate death. "Don't be foolish, Severus. For one, there's nothing you can do now. Prophecy paradoxes must be like time paradoxes; they have to occur, and so they will." Severus begins to start at this, and Percy talks more quickly, sensing the end of whatever shock is rendering Severus so compliant. "For another, you cannot *possibly* know what induced Trewlaney into giving a prophecy. Perhaps it was not your presence but Dumbledore's. Perhaps Peter Pettigrew was also hiding in that pub, listening in his little rat form. Perhaps it was the Dark Lord, bidding you to spy for him. Or perhaps it was something else entirely. Even if you were to live your life one hundred times over, you would not know why the prophecy was said, or why it targeted Lily and Harry Potter."

Percy flinches, expecting an incendiary response, but Severus only looks at him, a little lost, and more than a bit haunted. "Do you think so?"

"Take it from me," says Percy, trying for humour to lighten the burden. "What I do know is dwarfed one million times over by what I do not know, by what I will never know. You cannot torture yourself thusly. All we can do is honour the life that Lily gave to the cause."

For several long seconds, Severus is very still as he contemplates this. Then he stirs, the movement dragging his leg against Percy's. "Die with grace."

"I'm sorry?"

"The best we can do is die with grace, and hope for absolution in the life after this."

Percy suddenly thinks of Flamel, locked in his magicless cage for nearly a thousand years, a net woven from the rough strands of his eternal regret. He shudders at the thought. “We’re almost done, Severus,” he says, pressing his knee more purposefully against Severus’, in the hopes it may bring comfort. “We are almost done, and then we will be free, one way or another.”

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“He cares so *much* about Mudbloods,” says Tom later that day, as they walk through the streets of Diagon Alley, surveying the result of the Dark Lord’s latest raid. He had gone and personally murdered four separate shopkeepers, all halfblood, though of course tomorrow’s *Prophet* will declare them to be violent thieves and liars, and neither Tom nor Percy know why. “I do not think I ever cared quite so much, even as a boy.”

Percy is still feeling rather weak and tired from his sleepless night and the confrontation with the Seer, and the large take-away coffee he is clutching in his hands is not providing the type of support he’d expected when forking over nearly an entire half Galleon for it at the café. *Raise the issue of inflation with the goblins,* he adds to his mental matrix, which flutters angrily down to his mental desk. Percy wants to rub at his throbbing temples but does not want to point Tom toward his mental ineptitude. As a result, all he can muster up is a weak, “It is odd.”

Tom, luckily, does not need very much encouragement to continue speaking. He stops at the storefront of one of the affected vendors. It had been an ice cream shop, if Percy is remembering correctly, though even in his childhood he had rarely been treated to such a luxury. In the first timeline, he’d sometimes accompanied his mother alone to run her errands —his other siblings spurning what they felt was a boring use of their time—and she would occasionally reward him with a treat, though Percy had always preferred a little book or a block of chocolate, something more lasting, and whose consumption he could control himself over the next few weeks. “I wonder why,” Tom says thoughtfully, toeing at some of the dust and grime with a dragonhide-covered foot. Absently, Percy wonders how Tom has been funding his new lifestyle. He does not seem to eat nor sleep, but still, his new robes are not particularly cheap.

Percy starts as he realises that Tom is waiting impatiently for him to provide the next question, to lead into whatever thought Tom is brewing within his active mind. “Why He cares about Mudbloods?”

Tom nods. They look at their reflections in what is left of the shattered glass. The Dark Lord had preserved enough of the original lettering on the shop so that its identity would be clearly recognisable. *No two flavours alike!*

“I mean, of course everyone in Slytherin *cares* about Mudbloods,” Tom muses, narrowing his eyes at his reflection. “They *are* dirtier than us and quite unpleasant to be around. I, of course, quickly identified that one of the easiest ways to stir a group of purebloods was to

point them in the direction of a few undeserving Mudbloods and stand back. But *He* seems to be taking his dislike rather to the next level."

Percy takes another optimistic sip of his coffee, but the bitter tang of the magically warmed liquid does nothing to dispel his growing headache nor his unease. Sipping the drink does, however, occupy his mouth for long enough that he does not churlishly point out that Tom is being rather forgiving of his past self to claim that he used the issue of Mudbloods merely as a rallying device. Percy has seen some choice memories that would beg otherwise.

But it *is* true that the Dark Lord seems to split his time between hunting down Mudbloods, wands, and Harry Potter. Percy has not seen him lately; there had been a time where Percy had felt—not *close* to the Dark Lord, but perhaps proximate to the point where he'd started to feel like he understood him. But once again, the Dark Lord has sequestered himself away on a mission unbeknownst to anyone save his most privileged followers. Even Severus had only said, darkly, that he suspected it had to do with Lucius, but he did not know.

"It's no different than any of the other purebloods," Percy says after another fortifying sip of coffee.

Tom quirks an eyebrow, still facing their reflection. Percy watches his face watch Tom. "What do you mean?"

"Well, why do these purebloods care so much about Mudbloods? They're dirty, sure, but so are animals, and you don't see the likes of Malfoy and Yaxley murdering every animal in the forest," Percy points out. He may not feel close to the Dark Lord, but he is rather close to the Dark Lord's followers. "They care because they feel stymied, and weak, and as if they are not getting the respect they feel they deserve, and like perhaps after they walk out of the room, everyone begins to mock them. It's easier to look down on Mudbloods than to confront that."

"An interesting read," comments Tom. "And you believe *He* is like this too?"

Percy waves his hand to encompass all of Diagon Alley, and the rest of Britain besides. "He has everything—*everything*—and still he does not have Harry Potter, and *still* his opponents insist on squirrelling away the Mudbloods to other countries, and *still* you murdered his snake, and *still* people do not respect him."

"You think people do not respect him?"

Percy thinks about it, about everyone he's met in the Ministry and in line for coffee and at the bank, the way they flinch when they see him coming but continue to live their lives regardless. "They fear him," he says finally. "But they do not respect him. And fear is not tenable, not unless it is continually renewed. Do you know that people have begun to file for marriage licences again? Job applications for the Ministry are back up as well. People can adjust to fear."

Tom is very quiet as they stand for a few more minutes, staring in the shop. Then he turns on his heel abruptly and strides away, disappearing before he reaches the end of the street. Percy is left alone, clutching his coffee, and hoping desperately he had not just said something tremendously stupid.

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But as the days continue to pass, some torturously slowly, and some with staggering speed, Percy cannot find he regrets what he said. Fear is *not* tenable. Certainly even the Muggleborns in Azkaban are afraid, but when Percy goes with Pius to check on their condition, he finds that many of them are defiant and angry, too. Certainly the British populace is afraid, but they've always been able to adjust, and many of them still remember the wards and precautions from the first war and have become proficient in their use for this one too. And, as Percy finds out, certainly the Death Eaters are afraid—and, surprisingly, have more cause than most to *be* afraid, given their proximity to the Dark Lord and their insight into his power—but their fear wars with their natural proud inclinations, which Percy finds out almost by accident, when Yaxley invites him to a "casual dinner" that is nothing short of treacherous.

Cypress Parkinson is not there, of course, and neither is Nott. In truth, Yaxley ought not to be there either, but Percy knows that if there's one thing Yaxley cannot stand, it is to be disdained—or excluded. But the others who do attend are many of the same familiar faces from those earlier gatherings hosted by Lucius, the elder wizards or their elder children, those who'd begun to accumulate power before the Dark Lord's return and are not particularly pleased to give it up without reward.

Nobody *outwardly* complains, of course. The Dark Lord's name is not even mentioned, though Avery (the elder, father of Percy's old classmate, the one whose son and daughter in law were killed so carelessly by Tom) pointedly toasts to His health at the beginning of the meal with glasses of the finest elf-made wine.

But Percy, who has become far more attuned to the barely perceptible tremors of nuance in these types of pureblood plays, can see as if through a Disillusionment Charm. When they talk, carelessly, boastfully, of the laws they want to propose, and reminisce over the battles they'd fought in the past, there is an undercurrent of irony, for though the Wizengamot is in session, nobody would dare to propose something contrary to the Dark Lord's beliefs. When they ask Percy about the Minister's approval rating, they do so only out of politeness, because of course it does not matter whether the Minister is popular, only that Percy and Yaxley control him to the Dark Lord's satisfaction.

They speak of their family manors, of "reducing household staff at the main residence," of suddenly requiring vaguely complex renovations at their alternate homes—renovations that require nearly all of their house elves to be moved, or their wives to be relocated to oversee the process, or money to be preemptively withdrawn from Gringotts—and those without family houses jostle for invitations.

And they do not *criticise* the Dark Lord, of course, but they ask Yaxley and then Percy lightly, casually about the Dark Lord's plans for the next year, and then express polite, non-committal surprise at their lack of clarity.

They do not criticise the Dark Lord with their words but rather through every graceful, elegant motion of their wealthy bodies, every polished, artful word from their carefully guarded lips, through every subtle, intentional action, and Percy cannot help but wonder how the Dark Lord is blind to the challenge brewing right beneath his nose, or lack thereof.

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Percy has so much on his mind that he is nearly an hour late to his next summons to Parkinson Manor. He had to put Pius to rights before the next day, giving him a set of instructions to carry him through the day's meetings; he had to surreptitiously pass a message to Tonks, loitering by the entrance of the Ministry, smoking a large Muggle cigarette; he had to scratch out a quick update for Severus; and, nearly as an afterthought, he had to snag a take away meal from the Ministry cafeteria, a disgusting turkey wrap that has wilted lettuce even a strong Freshening charm can't save.

Percy is still running his tongue around his teeth, searching for that elusive piece of lettuce, when he bows his way into the main ballroom, casting a nonverbal charm to quiet his footsteps so they do not draw attention to his late arrival.

Yet his footsteps echo nevertheless.

Percy looks up and, a second later, thanks his instincts, as something tells him to throw his body onto the floor in supplication. Percy pulls frantically at his shields to erect strong barriers, armoured knights moving into position, having not thought to take the time to prepare a full meditation. *You're getting sloppy, Weasley*, he scolds himself, even as he mumbles an apology through numbed lips.

For the summons he had received was for a *private audience* with the Dark Lord, a Dark Lord who had now been waiting nearly an hour for Percy to deign to show up.

The curse, when it comes, is expected. Percy lays panting after it's lifted, feeling a sob caught in his throat, which had felt like a wolf had torn it out of his body with its jaws. It takes him several agonised seconds to come back to himself and pull himself to his knees.

"My apologies, my Lord," Percy says again, massaging his throat nervously with one hand.

He glances up cautiously to see the Dark Lord sitting upright in his throne, nearly vibrating with impatient energy. But not impatient *bad*, Percy realises, his senses highly attuned to every nuance in Voldemort's magic and mood. Impatient *sly*, impatient *playful,* like he has a toy to torment Percy with, a toy he is eager to display. Percy thinks suddenly of golden goblets displayed on a sideboard and hopes to Merlin that the toy does not have red hair and a blood-traitor last name.

"What form did the Cruciatus take for you, Percival?" The Dark Lord asks, opening his dialogue with a bit of a non-sequitur.

Percy is familiar with this tactic. Tom uses it as well to disarm his opponent before striking the killing blow. "A wolf, my Lord," Percy responds carefully. His hand rises again to his throat as he explains. "As if it tore out my throat."

"Fascinating," the Dark Lord breathes, genuine curiosity lighting the ember of his eerie red eyes. "Do you have a particular fear of wolves?"

“Not before today, my Lord,” Percy says honestly, and the Dark Lord rewards him with a laugh. Feeling a bit emboldened, Percy ventures, “I’ve always found the *Cruciatus* to be an interesting spell, my Lord. My own experiences with it have been limited—on the casting end, of course. I’m afraid my experiences on the receiving end have been far more frequent than I would have hoped, which is, of course, my fault for not being worthy.”

He tacks on this last nearly belatedly, after realising that the latter part of his sentence had sounded almost accusatory of the Dark Lord. But his luck holds, and the Dark Lord merely chuckles again and waves him on.

“As a caster, I do not consciously choose the form of torture that the victim feels. And yet it is unique to each person and to each instance of the spell. It is mental *and* physical, though of course it leaves no permanent physical marks.”

The Dark Lord nods eagerly. “The most fascinating of the Unforgivables, I would say,” he says, though Tom had at one point told Percy he was the most fascinated by the *Imperius*.

Then the academic, amiable atmosphere drops from the room like a towel sliding off a hook and spooling at Percy’s feet. “I wish to speak to you, Percival, about the acquaintance we both share.”

Tom.

Every ounce of Percy’s body screams in fear, which he is sure shows on his face, for the Dark Lord laughs again, and this time it is high and thin and cruel. “Oh, yes. I have allowed your relationship with him to occur unchecked for present, but I wanted to inform you *personally* that his time will soon be—over.”

Oh, Tom. Oh, Merlin. Of all the ways that Percy had envisioned losing Tom, he hadn’t thought Tom would be stupid enough to threaten the Dark Lord so openly that the Dark Lord had to assert himself against Tom. And if Tom had been captured or destroyed—then what did that mean, that the Dark Lord *was* more powerful, despite Tom’s claims to the contrary?

“I had assumed you knew of our continued association, my Lord, or I would have come to you sooner,” Percy says hesitantly. Oh, what had Tom revealed? Had Tom sacrificed Percy for his own gains? Is Percy about to die? He feels dizzy, and the room swims in front of him.

“Relax, Percival,” chides the Dark Lord, and then the unthinkable happens: he conjures up a chair, the same style of chair, Percy cannot help but notice, that dots the classrooms at Hogwarts, and motions for Percy to sit.

Percy takes a seat, gripping the edges of the wooden chair as if they are tethering him to life. He must be about to die; he cannot imagine the Dark Lord would allow him to live after affording him such an unexpected honour as being seated so casually.

Matching bathrooms, says Myrtle in Percy’s memories, and Percy feels warmed. If he is to die, so be it. He will not reveal anything. Tamping down on his panic, he straightens his spine and tries to calm his moist face.

“You are young and well-versed in magics,” Voldemort says lightly. “More than my other followers, save for perhaps Severus and Lucius. Tell me, Percival. What do you know of Grindelwald?”

Whatever Percy had been expecting Voldemort to ask, that had not been it. “Er, not as much as I ought to, I suppose,” Percy says, excusing himself. “I know of course of his rise to power, and of Dumbledore’s defeat of him. He has been imprisoned since then.”

“Have you ever heard of a wand referred to as the *Death Stick?* ”

Even the memory of Myrtle’s warm laughter in Percy’s ear isn’t enough to calm him. Sweat drips wetly down Percy’s back, hidden—hopefully—by his opulent purple robes. “Yes, my Lord. I believe it to be a fairytale, a myth, though I did hear rumours that Dumbledore’s power was derived from such a wand.”

“It was,” confirms the Dark Lord lightly. “And then Lucius stole it, though it is no matter. Lucius has promised to return it to me, in exchange for the lives of his wife and son. He will have to die, of course, but he knew that would be an eventuality when he made off with it from Dumbledore’s tomb. Grindelwald was the wand’s last confirmed owner; I have sent Lucius to speak to him, to see if Dumbledore truly inherited it.”

So the Dark Lord was in contact with *Lucius*, and *Lucius* had promised to return the wand, but not yet betrayed Severus and Percy. Why? Percy knows that Lucius would not hold his tongue unless he planned to use the information later, for increased gain. Wherever Draco is, he will have to be on his guard. Percy would not put it past Lucius to find his son and kill anything in his path, in order to find the Elder Wand and return it to the Dark Lord. And what better time for Lucius to tell the Dark Lord about Severus’ betrayals than after he’s presented his master with an unbeatable wand?

“I am telling you this because you have no ambition to defeat me,” the Dark Lord says, almost tenderly. “I have seen his memories of you, Percival. You have cared for my soul as if it were your own.”

The words echo in the cavernous room. A white bed, fingers on his throat, lips brushing against his. “I swore a vow, my Lord,” Percy croaks, his throat impossibly dry. “That I would never harm any part of your soul.”

“Yes,” the Dark Lord agrees, regarding Percy. “So Tom said. Tell me, Percival. Have you heard of a sworn companion?”

“Not precisely, my Lord,” Percy hedges.

“An apprentice was at one point a sworn companion,” the Dark Lord lectures, sounding terribly like Tom as his voice falls into a teaching cadence. “Traditionally, apprentices gave their masters a single gold coin and a book of parchment and bade themselves into their masters’ care. But the practice of sworn companions preceded even that of the ancient apprentices; you have heard of Merlin and Arthur, I believe? Arthur went to the warlock Merlin and swore to be his companion, his loyal servant, his sword kept in its sheath, his staff resting against the tree.”

Despite himself, Percy is spellbound, caught up in the web that the Dark Lord weaves for them both with his words.

“Merlin was a powerful wizard, and many did not understand why he would need Arthur, a young and untrained knight, though the son of a king, to follow behind him. But Merlin knew that his power was limited, bade to him by the ancient gods, stemming from the land and the sky and the magic of the Earth. He was only as powerful as the Earth and as fallible. So he turned to Arthur to augment his power.”

“He drew on Arthur’s magic,” says Percy, his eyes wide.

“He used Arthur like a wand; to focus his magic, to augment his power, and to extend his reach,” confirms the Dark Lord. Something in the formal cadence of his tones reminds Percy of McGonagall. *And so we begin with our own minds.*

“It’s where the Dark Mark comes from, isn’t it?” Percy asks, his hand creeping over his forearm to trace around the outline of the snake.

The Dark Lord starts, but then a smile begins to play along his thin lipless mouth. “Yes. All of my loyal followers are to me as Arthur was to Merlin. But Merlin knew that his power would die with Arthur, and so he gave to Arthur a choice; to swear to be by his side forever, so that he may live with Merlin, or to die a mortal death and be forgotten.”

“And?” Percy cannot help but ask eagerly.

“And Arthur denied it. He wished to be king of his own people, not understanding that to be Merlin’s companion would be to be elevated beyond the court of mere mortals.” Here the Dark Lord turns his attention on Percy. It burns on Percy’s skin like a brand. “You understand what I am saying.”

“Yes, my Lord.” And Percy does, and for one terrible second he is tempted. To live by the Dark Lord, to live by his magic, to be with Tom until the ends of the Earth… “And—Tom? What of him?”

The Dark Lord rests his fingers casually on the new wand in his possession. “With these new instruments of power that I have discovered, I have no need for *things* such as *him*,” he says casually. Percy has to wonder, had he found the other Hallows, or believed himself to have found them? Did he know of Harry’s role in this too? “Particularly those tempted to betray me for their own ends.”

“So you will destroy him.” Percy manages at the last second to not say *them.*

The Dark Lord peers closely at Percy. “Does that sadden you, Percival?”

“It does, my Lord,” Percy admits. “But he is merely a shadow of you. Everything I sought in him, I find in you dozens of times over.”

This answer pleases the Dark Lord, Percy can tell. Voldemort crosses his legs and leans back, cocking his head, and looking very much human. “I am nearly done securing my place in

eternity," he says calmly, as if reporting on a potion. "And then I will destroy Harry Potter, and I will not have enemies. What would you do next?"

Put on the spot, Percy has to resist the urge to fidget uncomfortably. He does not try to demur or avoid the question; the Dark Lord does not like prevarication. Better to say something steadfastly and incorrectly than fumble his way toward what he thinks the Dark Lord would like to hear.

But Percy has an advantage through the many years of discussing such topics with Tom. "In truth, I care not for issues of blood purity," he admits, staring at his white-knuckled hands. "I do not like Muggles, but I think of them as animals; something necessary to sustain their own populations, but not something I wish to ever interact with myself. The issue of Mudbloods I would like to explore further; I am not convinced that Mudbloods are not descendants of Squibs, briefly lost to us, and then brought back into our society. I am happy to take whatever you decree as the truth, my Lord, for these questions of blood purity are beyond the realm of my knowledge."

"It is a rather politically expedient issue, but magically questionable," agrees the Dark Lord, as if they are discussing a political party, rather than the Dark Lord's regime. "I would be interested to see what your research unearths, Percival."

Percy hurries forward. "The only thing that I believe should matter is *magic.* Magic is merit; but we need those less powerful to fill important roles in our society." He waves his hand to encompass the entire Ministry. "I can't get a cup of decent tea in the Ministry, since no pureblood wants to be the one to brew it for me, even if he is barely a step above a Squib."

The Dark Lord laughs, loudly and fully, the sound reverberating in Percy's chest. "So you do not wish to kill all Mudbloods or Squibs, but slot them into their rightful place, based on their magical ability."

"Yes," says Percy, praying it is the correct answer, "Society will always need echelons."

The Dark Lord sits once again like a wizard on a throne, signalling to Percy that their brief discourse is over. "Interestingly put," he says. "You must think of what I have proposed and give me your answer when I require it of you."

"Yes, my Lord," Percy says, ducking his head.

Later that night, he sits at his bed and tries to write to Severus, but he cannot muster up any words to describe that strange and unprecedented experience.

(But the offer warms him. He cannot say that it does not, though of course he cannot accept the offer, nor consider allying himself forever with the Darkest wizard of their time.

But the Dark Lord is the greatest wizard of their time too, greater than Harry or Dumbledore or Grindelwald. For the first time, Percy mourns what became of Tom not for Tom's sake, but for his own. Had Tom become a professor of Hogwarts, had he been a prominent wizard of learning, had he opened his doors to those interested in studying under his tutelage…Percy wishes desperately he could have met the Dark Lord in another life, in a life where the only

cost he would pay to learn from him was a galleon and a thin notebook of parchment, rather than his soul, and the lives of all he holds dear.)

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But Tom has not been captured, at least not yet. Percy finds him in the Minister's office the very next day, waiting eagerly for Percy to arrive, creating small ice snakes out of his magic to writhe over the Minister's desk to entertain himself.

"Tom," Percy says in surprise. "Tom, I had a meeting with the Dark Lord yesterday. He told me—well, he all but threatened you. I thought you'd disappeared."

Tom rolls his eyes, holding out his hand for one of the snakes to crawl languidly up his fingers. "He's always threatening me. Did He tell you that Lucius has promised him the *Elder Wand?* What a load of rubbish. He's scared, Percy. He's reaching for fairy tales."

"Well of course the Elder Wand is but a myth," Percy says carefully, "but Tom, I've seen his magic personally. You're strong, but he can challenge you."

"Nobody can challenge me." Tom closes his fingers around the snake, which melts in his hand and releases small eddies of magic back into the air. "But you make a good point, I suppose. I examined the boy, when he was standing near me. The soul fragment in him is—weak, and I do not know how *his* soul, or the prophecy, may have affected it. I do not think I need to extract it."

"So…" Percy prompts Tom slowly. "What are you implying?"

"You would not find it difficult to determine the prophecy, would you?" Tom counters, raising an eyebrow shrewdly. "Certainly you have members of the Order you could reach out to, should it become necessary."

"Tom—"

"One of your more reasonable brothers, perhaps, or your Transfiguration professor. I am not upset—you know, as do I, that once you reveal the words of the prophecy to *Him*, He will act on it. He could bring the boy to him at any moment, merely by kidnapping one of his many loyal friends. It is only his fear of the unknown—and of me—that is staying his hand."

Tom's derisive tone makes it clear what he thinks of Harry's weakness in this manner, or perhaps Voldemort’s.

"But you also know that the moment the prophecy has been fulfilled, I will defeat the Dark Lord, and I believe that something in you is afraid of this outcome."

"I am not afraid," Percy protests. Tom has, of course, missed the critical part of Percy's calculation: they need to destroy the locket, if they are to have any hopes of ending everything in one fell swoop, and Percy needs to find a way to open said locket, considering his Parseltongue orbs are no longer functional and the Boy Who Lived is not obeying his instructions. But Percy cannot say that, of course.

"Are you worried I will forget about you?" Tom's amusement rankles Percy, who cannot help but scowl petulantly.

But what can he say that will explain his hesitancy to give the Dark Lord the prophecy, and thus enable Tom to defeat the Dark Lord once the prophecy is fulfilled?

“What if confronting the Dark Lord results in your harm?” Percy asks, raising his eyes to meet Tom’s. “I am not worried that you will forget me, Tom. We have been through…much together.” He feels the traitorous burn begin to flood his cheeks and hurries on. “But prophecies are notoriously unpredictable.”

“But that is not what you are afraid of,” says Tom quietly. “You do not believe in prophecy; I can tell that you do not believe you will discover anything of note by pursuing the Seer of the Dark Lord’s prophecy. Why do you fear me still, Percy? Have I given you cause to believe I cannot be trusted?”

Percy’s cheeks tint, but he finds it difficult to look away from the intensity of Tom’s gaze. Everything that remains unsaid hovers in the mist between them, as insubstantial as Percy’s Patronus form.

“Tell me, Percy,” continues Tom enticingly. He takes a small step forward, so that his magic washes over Percy, causing him to shiver from the sudden cold. “We are partners, you know. Perhaps in—more ways than one.”

“What do you plan to do?” Percy says quietly, the words coaxed from him by the strange glint in Tom’s eyes, and the way his own magic opens up to meet Tom’s. “What will you do, when you are unchallenged? Will you leave the country and not return? Will you continue in the Dark Lord’s stead?”

“And this uncertainty worries you?” Tom raises an eyebrow and turns, perching on the top of the Minister’s desk like a small, lithe bird, the sinuous lines of his body in contrast to the sharp edges of the wood below. Percy bristles, anticipating a dismissive answer, but to his surprise Tom continues to look away from him as he says softly, “In truth, it worries me too. I have my memories, from this life, and the lives I lived before, and ghost-memories of those who have interacted with the diadem. I have the privilege of hindsight, in a way; I can see how some of the plans I made were—corrupted, while others discarded. But to truly take *His* future as mine is to imply that we are the same, and I cannot believe that, not really.”

“It is like looking into a looking glass, and seeing only a distorted version of yourself.” Percy thinks suddenly of his seventeenth birthday, of the mirror in the Burrow, of his strange double reflection, thirty and seventeen together. “Or rather, seeing multiple versions of yourself: all of the versions of you that you have been, and those that you could be, and those that you hope not to be, and those that you plan to be. You see them all, but you do not recognise which is you.”

Tom’s voice is a study in nonchalance when he observes, “You speak as if from experience.”

For a sliver of a second, Percy has the crazy desire to tell Tom *why* he understands what it is like to wake in a time that is not his own, to live a life that hovers just barely on top of the life

he has already lived. Of course, he can do no such thing, so instead he only says, “I have a lot of practise not liking who I have been, Tom, or regretting who I may become. But what you have is a gift. You have seen one possible future of yourself, and you can choose to reject it, and forge your own path.”

“And this, this is the path you’ve chosen to forge for yourself?” Tom glances back, as if he cannot help himself, and Percy flinches at the spark that flashes between them as their eyes graze each other’s line of sight. “How do you know that you are on the correct path?”

“I don’t,” admits Percy. “And I spend most of my time doubting myself, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. But, Tom—that sort of decision, that gift, if you will, does not just arrive once and then leave. In theory, we can continually re-evaluate and decide to be a different version of ourselves, if we do not like who we see in the mirror.” Realising suddenly that his voice had changed, as if speaking to a peer, rather than to Tom, Percy gives a guilty start and then tacks on, “At least, that’s what I tell myself. It’s probably a load of rubbish.”

“Probably,” agrees Tom, but his face is thoughtful.

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When Percy finally manages to corner Tonks—he leaves a preserved turkey sandwich outside the East Ministry entrance, one of the signals she’d concocted for when he needed to speak to her, he only has a few minutes for her, and what she has to say is not encouraging.

Harry has not been to the house at all, though Remus has, and he reports that the Dark Lord is marshalling his Dark forces, clearly preparing for a confrontation of some sorts. Percy tells Tonks that he expects the same, though with Landon now…gone, the escape network leading into France has been…

“Not destroyed,” Tonks mutters lowly, looking around them nervously. She is disguised as one of their old classmates, perfectly pureblood and an acceptable person for Percy to speak to for a few minutes, but of course it never pays to let one’s guard down. “Stalled. There’s going to be a breakout of Azkaban. Been planning it with Cedric.”

Percy smiles blandly, though of course he’s quite shocked. “He’ll be furious. There will likely be retribution.”

“We’ve been making Portkeys by the bushel, thanks to your instructions,” Tonks mutters, pretending to flip through her schedule-book, as if to pencil in Percy for lunch. Yaxley comes up the hall and spots Percy speaking to an attractive pureblood witch and feels the need to leer playfully at Percy, which Tonks manages to ignore with all the grace of an Auror on a mission. “We figure the time for subtlety is long gone. Get ‘em all out while we can.”

“You’d better get them *all* out if you try that; everyone left will be killed,” Percy says snappishly, sending a marginally rude gesture to Yaxley behind his back. “You can do a lot

more damage with that many Portkeys if you act with more subtlety. Put a notice in a Muggle newspaper or something, let everyone know where they can find a Portkey. Make it difficult to understand unless you've got the password and don't direct the Portkey to anywhere sensitive, so if a Snatcher gets a hold of it, you're not all bolloxed up."

So hopefully, Percy thinks later that night, he's avoided the kind of disaster that seemed to follow the Order around in the first war: a bold stand, followed by a show of revenge that inevitably harms more people than the initial stand helped. Of course, when the Trio breaks into Gringotts two days later, it all becomes a moot point.

The absolute *fucking* imbeciles. When Percy reads the large headline in the next morning's *Prophet*, he sets his tea down and spends a very satisfying moment unleashing every curse word that he knows. It seems that Harry, in true Chosen One fashion, has taken the decision to act out of everyone's hands: Severus', Percy's, Tom's and the Dark Lord's, for such an outright act of aggression cannot be ignored.

Percy takes a long minute to clear his mind before he stands, his face grim. If Harry has brought the war to their doorstep, then it will take all of Percy's skill, both with magic and with calculation, to stay a step ahead, hovering in the air seconds ahead of Harry, ready to dive in and take action as needed.

It's time, he writes to Severus, though Severus is likely already with the Dark Lord and will not be able to respond. The words look so empty on the page that Percy writes them again, just to convince himself, to make it more real. *It's time.*

Merlin help us all.

And he closes the book and stands to go to work. There will be much to be done and very little room for error.

CULMINATION (6/?)

Chapter Notes

> Unfortunately I will be out for two weeks starting this Friday. I will have my laptop but not too much time to work on revising the next chapter. As it is a big chapter (!!!) I don't want to rush it but will do my best!
>
> This chapter moves us right along. Remember when all Percy had to do was lounge in his Hogwarts four poster and write little notes to Tom?

CHAPTER ELEVEN: CULMINATION (6/?)

1997 — 1998 (Percy is 21 & 34, Severus is 36, Harry is 17, and Dumbledore no longer lives)

The day that follows is horrid. The Ministry is all aflutter, ripples of tension and anxiety and fear wavering through the air, like the strings of a cello plucked and left to reverberate without supervision. Several people overcome their fear of Percy to ask him, worriedly, if the Order is going to invade the Ministry, and he scowls away from the entwined hope and the despair that he sees reflected in their wide gazes. The inner sanctum of the Minister's office is no more peaceful than the busy hallways outside; Percy snaps at Julian to fetch him a tea and sends Matthew on the futile task of sorting through the piles of post accumulating at a seemingly interminable rate. Only minutes after Julian returns with his tea, Percy is confronted by a delegation of goblins accompanied by the brutish Department Head of Magical Creatures, who seems seconds away from cursing the lot of them, his unpleasant face twisted into a snarl of self-righteous hatred. Percy through Pius reminds both where their loyalties ought to lie and points out that it was the *goblins'* defences that were breached, and one consequence of the goblins' insistence they be allowed to guard their own vaults is that the Ministry has no liability in case of a break-in.

Nothing was stolen, the goblin delegation lead spits out triumphantly. Nothing was taken by the filthy wizards, but a vault on the lowest level of the bank was nearly destroyed by dragon fire, and the goblins expect the Ministry to pay.

"Absolutely not," snaps Percy, speaking as himself. Glaring at the goblin, Percy is reminded suddenly of Auntie Muriel, facing off with her account manager. *You're a shrimp*, she tells him, and the sudden unexpected pain of the memory sharpens his tone. "You have no proof it was even Potter; nothing was stolen, and the only illegal activity that occurred did so in protected goblinspace, under jurisdiction of the last Great Accord. My word on this matter is final."

The goblin gives him a dirty look, his compatriots behind him baring their teeth. "Diggory would have helped us."

"Diggory's dead," Percy says crisply, even as the new Head of the Department scowls at the reminder of his predecessor. "Both of you ought to remember who our new leader is. Now get out of my—our—sight; the Minister must meet with the Head of the Aurors, as you failed to apprehend the intruders yourself."

Nott is, of course, eager to pursue Harry, and he's already marshalling a force of his secret forces—easily identifiable by the magical circlets they wear on their upper arms, but each to their own—when Percy and Pius arrive, joined belatedly by Yaxley, who reports in an undertone to Percy that the Mudbloods downstairs have taken advantage of the confusion of the morning (shouting, fear, blame, apprehension, the usual aftermath of whatever nonsense Harry has gotten himself into) to organise a mass escape, disappearing without a trace except for a set of obscure Muggle tools.

Fine, Percy thinks uncharitably to Tonks. *Well done.*

Percy gives a little shake of his head as they draw close to Nott. No need to open this new tin of dragonworms, not when they already have Nott nearly frothing at the mouth with eagerness.

Percy cannot prevent Nott; the Boy Who Lived was sighted illegally breaking into Gringotts, even if they do not have strict proof to the same. But Percy can derail him, and he tells Nott that Potter was sighted with Sirius Black, who likely was breaking into his own vault, and that Percy believed it likely that they would flee to the southern countryside, where the Black family was reputed to have a summer manor.

Nott's sharp eyes narrow at this tip, rendered so helpfully by Percy, who can admit he has not been entirely successful in hiding his dislike of the other man. But Yaxley, idiotic, arrogant Yaxley, comes to his rescue, corroborating his story and saying that his parents had once been to said Black manor, before the first fall of the Dark Lord, though he wouldn't quite expect Nott to understand.

This Nott is not *the* Nott, but a second cousin, and so would not have been invited to any particularly privileged gatherings that the Black family would have had. His face goes nearly purple with indignation, but Yaxley technically ranks higher than him in the unofficial, amorphous social hierarchy enacted according to the Dark Lord's whims, and Nott knows perfectly well that to ignore such a tip and lose the boy in the process would certainly be the end of his career, if not his life. Given that Percy had just invented said summer manor, he isn't sure why Yaxley had said such a thing, but perhaps he had accidentally hit upon the truth, and Yaxley's parents had summered with the Blacks.

So Nott goes, and he takes his odious team with him. Then there is a press conference: Pius, in neatly pressed green robes, speaking to Potter's rebellious nature, informing the masses he merely vandalised the bank but did not steal anything from the vaults, just a crazy boy looking for trouble, etcetera, ad nauseam.

The Cup?

Presumably, Percy writes back to Snape, hiding in the loo for a few blessed minutes to avoid the hordes of people outside. Again: bloody fucking imbeciles. The Trio, not the Ministry workers, though he supposes the obscenity applies to them as well. Had Harry just spoken to Andromeda as directed, the locket would already have been destroyed and Percy could sleep with ease. Percy does not want to know how the four teenagers broke into Gringotts, nor what they thought they'd accomplished. He writes in a strong hand, *Idiots.*

He has summoned me this evening. You likely will be as well.

A pause, then,

I can feel his anger. We must be ready.

As soon as Percy reads those words, he realises that he too can feel the Dark Lord's anger, that it has been roiling underneath the surface of his own anxiety, his Mark pulsing with it. Nott must have been able to feel it too, and Yaxley besides, which, Percy thinks, explains some of Yaxley's hesitance to reveal the missing Mudbloods and his sudden willingness to rid the Ministry of the secret Auror force.

So Percy frets away the rest of his day, hoping Tonks will contact him, assuaging the fears of the many wizards at the Ministry who believe anarchy is among them—as if they were not already in an untenable situation—and plotting and disregarding ways to contact Harry. The Patronus would be the easiest, but in a moment of privacy, Percy pulls out his wand to try, and cannot think of a single memory that produces anything stronger than mist.

Out of sheer desperation for a distraction, Percy goes to inspect the Muggleborn holding cells, where he sees, as Yaxley mentioned, a scattering of Muggle tools. Percy had not taken Muggle Studies but he can guess as to some of their functions due to his father's various obsessions. One is certainly some sort of knife, and one is a clip for the hair, and one even seems like a small yellow duck, though how that helped the Muggleborns escape, Percy could not say. Likely they were planted by Tonks to distract anyone who may be looking for an explanation.

Percy peeks inside the other room and sees to his surprise the Dementor is still there, though he is alone, his two offspring having disappeared. Percy has checked on the Dementors a few times, but typically only the younger two are there, silently floating, and showing no inclination to speak to Percy.

“You are still here,” Percy blurts out, taken aback by the strange site of the inky black shadow of the Dementor against the sharp, gleaming white walls. “I thought you had left long ago.”

I had my own tasks to complete, the Dementor says. ***But I knew you would come today after the commotion.***

"Did you help?" Percy asks curiously. Two missing guards plus two freed Dementors is an equation that is difficult to stomach but easy to solve. And in truth, Percy does not particularly care about those wizards. After witnessing their thuggish brutality for months,

Percy can safely say that he finds them to be the animals far more than the Muggleborns they despise.

The Dementor's chuckle reverberates through Percy's head. ***They were instructed to apprehend anyone trying to escape.***

Percy can read between the lines on that one. He doubts the Dementors care about the lines between Muggleborns and wizards; he doubts they were trying to *do the right thing* by taking down the guards. But Percy can appreciate when disparate goals align, and he thinks suddenly that the Dementors have been as trapped as the Muggleborns, in their own way.

"Well, I've come to you because I need help," Percy says. Then he adds sheepishly, "Again."

I will be leaving this land today, the Dementor cautions him. ***We travel East to find our clan.***

Percy feels an odd sense of bereavement, which is plainly ridiculous, considering that he is not *friends* with this creature, and in all truth he should be relieved that he—it—is leaving him. But it is not about him, and he can recognise he is being unfair. "As is your right," Percy says graciously. "I wish you luck, and please let me know if I may help you."

I have learned to recognise your soul*,** the Dementor says solemnly. ***I will be able to find you, should I need.

"And don't forget I still owe you a debt." Percy hesitates and then says clearly, so that his words cannot be misunderstood, "I will not forget what you have done to help."

It is rare to find a wizard that will keep his word.

Percy shrugs uncomfortably, thinking of his family, of Landon, of Tom. "There are many promises I have not kept."

The Dementor hovers closer to him. ***What is your last question for me?***

For a second, Percy says nothing. If he does not say the words, he does not have to learn the answer. He can fail at the task, and it will not, strictly speaking, be his fault. He will have plausible deniability, or something like it.

But Percy, damn him, is a Gryffindor. His mother's voice echoes in his head. *Do what needs to be done.* And so he opens his mouth.

"One of the Horcruxes has grown powerful, absorbing the others' magics into his own." One last second of the blissful before, when Percy does not know the answer. "He is more powerful than I. How can I...well, how can someone destroy him—his soul? I...we...do not have a hope of destroying his form beyond magical repair, not if it came to a duel."

***Not if it came to a duel of magic*.**

Something in the Dementor's voice is—not playful, but mischievous, maybe, or knowing, as if Percy is missing something obvious.

"But what in Merlin's name could a duel of the *soul* look like?" Percy insists, not particularly interested in being the butt of an obvious joke. "I have the stone, but it's not…I mean, I can't…" He fumbles over the words for a second, clutching unconsciously at the small grey stone that is always in his pocket.

You can, and you will, if there is no other way, intones the Dementor serenely.

Percy scowls, but the Dementor says nothing more, even when Percy tries to plead with him. He merely floats silently until Percy gives it up as a lost cause, subsiding angrily into silence.

"Fine," Percy says grumpily. "But if I die, I expect you to come and collect my soul personally."

A ripple of a laugh moves through the room, causing the Dementor's robes to sway and ripple like waves collecting at the shore of a pebbly beach. Then the Dementor inclines his head and his voice floats into Percy's head one final time. ***I have learned much from our association***, it says. ***And I hope to speak to you again before it is time for me to collect your soul.***

"Wait," Percy cries out as the Dementor begins to disappear backwards through the hall, suddenly afraid to let this wise being leave him alone with Tom Riddle's soul. But the Dementor does not stop, fading away until only Percy remains, his hand still clutching the stone.

"*Expecto Patronum*," says Percy suddenly, hopefully, but he produces only mist, as usual.

Speaking to the Dementor helps give Percy the strength to continue through the rest of his day, even when he learns the Order, or some group similar, staged an attack on the *Prophet* and melted four of the six wizarding printing presses, an act which the remaining two will work overtime to disparage in tomorrow's paper. Percy soothes the ruffled feathers of the editor in chief, who bristles like a large, horned owl at the indignity.

Percy wearily sends a missive to Nott to request security at the *Prophet* printing house, sees to it that Pius has done nothing too odd in the few hours since Percy last renewed his mental instructions, and then goes via the toilets to his flat, which is blissfully empty and silent.

Well, empty and silent it may be, but after the first few minutes of blissful solitude pass, Percy sits upright on his sofa and calls out hesitantly, "Tom?"

The only answer Percy receives is a soft questioning hoot from Hermes, who cocks his head at Percy from his perch in the kitchen.

Percy waves away his owl and collapses back on the sofa, though his bliss is marred now by anxiety. Very strange for Tom to not contact him, not on such a day. In fact, Percy would have expected him early, either to complain vehemently about Harry, or to agonise (or gloat, depending on his mood) about the Dark Lord's public failure.

What if Tom *had* gone after Harry? What if Harry were already dead, and Percy had spent the last few crucial hours of the war playing at Minister? *Looks like you finally made yourself*

Head Boy of something. But at what cost?

And what had possessed Harry to *break into Gringotts,* anyway? How had they managed it? What had been so tantalising a prize to justify such a reckless action? Percy regrets that he hadn't tried harder to find Harry and just *tell* him everything that had occurred. He'd thought it be easy enough to find the boy when needed, and safer for all parties for him to delay contact until it was, strictly speaking, necessary. Well, now it is necessary, and the boy is nowhere to be found.

Percy spends the two hours between the end of his workday and the time that his Mark begins to burn thusly, though he forces himself to break for supper, to at least have some sustenance in his stomach for the inevitable Cruciatus that he will receive for his many failings. As a result, when his Mark *does* begin scalding his arm, he is more rattled and discomfited, rather than serene and relaxed, as he always hopes to be before answering a summons.

Inside Parkinson Manor, Cypress conspicuously absent, as usual, the scene that greets him would have destroyed any hopes of serenity Percy would have had, even if he'd succeeded in calming himself down earlier. The second that Percy walks into the room, his eyes snap to his little sister's, bound and struggling weakly against thick, heavy ropes, flanked by Tom and Severus, both of whom are watching carefully for his reaction.

"Percival," says the Dark Lord, and Percy freezes and then drops to his knees, half out of instinct, and half because his legs feel too wobbly to support him. Severus is watching him with such a look of intensity that Percy feels it scald its way down his body, searing across him like flames, in stark contrast to Tom's expression of cold curiosity, which glances off Percy without impact. "It has become quite urgent that you retrieve for me the prophecy."

"My Lord," mumbles Percy through numb lips, after an eternity of time passes, which could have been three seconds or three hours, so great is Percy's shock. Ginny, oh *Ginny*, what has he done? Hadn't she been hiding? Hadn't Severus protected her?

If Severus hadn't protected her, that would mean Severus had no choice. Percy tries to focus on that, instead of the dread and sorrow and panic that thuds heavily through his body with each slow, sticky heartbeat. But he cannot. Ginny's eyes are the exact brown of his mother's, and they latch on to his and stay there, unmoving, full of an expression Percy cannot name, as inexplicable and foreign to him as every expression his mother has worn on her face while speaking to him, as if they are on either sides of a distorted mirror, and he is blinded by the sun.

"Harry Potter has declared a state of war," continues the Dark Lord. Perhaps an observer would think his words light, or reserved, or at the very worst merely cool. But Percy flinches at each one, so attuned is he to the nuances of the Dark Lord's magic, that he can tell instinctively that the wizard is furious, like a tightly coiled spring, set with an animation charm seconds from flickering into being. "And so I shall respond. *Find me the prophecy,* Percival Weasley, and we will end this war before anyone is harmed in the aftermath."

Percy nods robotically, unable to tear his eyes from Ginny, who struggles all the more desperately when she hears Voldemort's intentions. "Yes, my Lord," he whispers, and the

sound of the Dark Lord's high, cruel laugh lashes over his back like a whip.

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Severus has to nearly wrestle Percy through the Side Apparation to Hogsmeade and the long, cold walk to the castle. Hogwarts is eerily silent, but Percy stumbles beside Severus as if in a dream, feeling cold and empty and strangely numb. Only when they arrive in Severus' office does the sound seem to return to his ears with a painful roar.

"I bade you to protect her," Percy snaps at Severus, who turns on Percy with his eyes flashing, his hooked nose accentuating the sneer of unease marring his lips.

"I cannot ignore a direct order from the Dark Lord, as well you know," Severus hisses back. "If the girl had the sense to stay hidden, this could have been avoided. The Carrows must have suspected where she was; by the time I returned from my earlier audience with the Dark Lord, she was captured."

Percy glares at Severus, his chest heaving. "She is in the *hands of the Dark Lord,* Severus! My sister! My *sister*." His voice breaks on the last word, and he sits heavily on the chair in Severus' office, so familiar to him from his days in school, and yet so odd underneath him, as if it were not wood supporting him, as if the world had reassembled itself when he was not looking, and he can no longer trust what he once knew.

"Percy, she will be safe," Severus says carefully, taking a seat on the other side of the desk. Percy looks up at him hopelessly, part of his mind still in the Manor, watching *Tom* take charge of her care, *Tom*, his expression unreadable as he volunteered to see Ginny settled. Percy had not been able to protest, not with both Tom and Voldemort watching him, not when Voldemort dismissed him and Severus, an ugly expression of triumph marring his pale face. In Hogwarts, Severus continues. "She is a pureblood, and she is your family. The Dark Lord —and Tom—know that to harm her without cause would be more than you could bear, and both believe they do not need to threaten you to keep you compliant."

"Then why kidnap her?" Percy cries out, kicking savagely at the solid wooden desk, as if he could bring it crashing to its knees.

"For one, because you have ignored his orders to fetch the prophecy," Severus points out wryly. "And yes, I advised you to take that action." Percy shuts his mouth dispiritedly, caught just seconds before accusing Severus of that very thing. "But I do not believe he took Ginevra for *you*."

It takes a second for Percy's mind to latch on, and then—"Harry," he growls angrily. "Bloody Harry Potter. He's going to use Ginny to lure him to his trap."

"Yes," Severus confirms heavily. Percy kicks again at the desk, but without much fervour. This time, he registers the pain in his toes and winces, feeling very close to tears, or perhaps a

Cruciatus. Even the calm, familiar surroundings of Severus' office (though without its array of odd Potions paraphernalia and ingredients in green bottles, it is nearly a different room), the pine-scented walk they'd taken to Hogwarts (past the shuttered Hogsmeade shops, the *Three Broomsticks* defiantly open, though dreadfully empty), or the reassuring sounds of the castle (eerily silent, all of the students confined to their House Common Rooms, though it is still before curfew) are insufficient to ground Percy, to give him something to lean on while planning his next move.

"We must move very carefully," Severus says precisely. "We will modify the memory of the prophecy, so that it seems that we fetched it today. As soon as we give it to the Dark Lord, he will want to summon the boy to him. I will convince him that we ought to tarry for a few days more, to allow him time to prepare for the aftermath of his victory."

"But Ginny—"

"Your sister will not be harmed. I will make sure of it."

Percy begins to say that Severus had promised the same while Ginny was in Hogwarts, but then he subsides and looks down at his hands. Ginny's safety is no more guaranteed than the rest of theirs, not when the future of their lives depends on these next crucial days. Somewhere inside Percy, his mind begins to wearily begin anew, thinking through what must lie ahead. "He will want an audience. Do we want him to want an audience?"

"He will kill the boy, if the boy comes to sacrifice himself." Severus does not say what they both already know: prophecy or no, Harry will sacrifice himself if he believes it necessary. "If Dumbledore is to be believed, whatever sacrificial magic he is hoping will take form may save the boy's life. It would be beneficial to us to have an audience for that."

"But if not?"

Severus gives the faintest shrug of his shoulders. "If the boy dies, it does not matter. We will still have to destroy the locket, the diadem, and the Dark Lord himself. Unless we can accomplish all of these tasks at once, then the rest of the world will hear of Potter's death, whether or not there are many Death Eaters present."

"So we must contact Harry. We must destroy the locket and ensure Harry is…ready to die." Percy nearly falters on the last words, but he forces them out despite himself. "How will we find him?"

"You found him once before."

"Tom found him, not I. And we cannot tell Tom what we are planning."

Severus looks at him soberly. "Go to Tom," he says, and his voice is suddenly low and intent with meaning. "Beg him to find Harry for you. Tell him you wish to enact your own private revenge. He will understand that. If you have only seconds alone with the boy, you know what to say."

"But we need Harry—"

"We need one of them to open the locket," corrects Severus, and his words are raw and terrible. "But both have proven to be capable of destroying a Horcrux. More importantly, we need all three of them to be destroyed within days."

Percy is silent as he absorbs what Severus has said. Their time of delay has ended, suddenly, and earlier than Percy had thought, but he'd known it always would have to have ended, and they no longer have time to hope matters will arrange themselves nearly.

"I've not done anything at all," he says finally. Before Severus can protest—Muggleborns perhaps saved, length of the war perhaps shortened, Cedric's life for Landon's, all these little trinkets that Percy accumulates and stacks in his mental library to counterweight his sins—Percy waves him off. "The least I can do now is *act*."

Like a snake in the grass, he thinks to himself for the first time in years. He'd thought he'd have become skilled in the art of action by now, skilled enough at least to know when and how to take decisive action. He supposes that to live two lifetimes and not learn the same lesson twice suggests that he will never learn it, not even in a third.

"There is something else," Severus says into the silence. Percy catches the strange note in the man's tone and looks up, frowning. Severus does not meet his eyes. Percy begins to rise instinctively, his internal alarming charms ringing like church bells on a mountaintop, slowly at first, and then sonorously loud as the wind picks up. "Lucius has returned to England."

“Yes, I had heard—”

Severus nods soberly, cutting off Percy before he can begin. "He wrote to the Dark Lord to tell him that he will turn over the Elder Wand in exchange for his family's protection."

"The Dark Lord told me as such, but I did not believe Lucius would try such a thing."

Severus' gaze snaps to Percy so quickly that Percy has to steady himself against the chair he'd just stood from. "You should have told me that the Dark Lord spoke of this to you."

"I—I suppose I forgot," Percy admits, his cheeks flushing. "I am sorry."

"He admitted to the Dark Lord that he'd thought Draco may be the Wand's master and fled to protect his son. Abroad, he learned that his suspicions were false. He’s brought the Dark Lord Grindelwald, as a proof of his loyalty.”

"Lucius is going to put you in danger, Severus," Percy bites out, his hand tightening on the back of the chair. "He has no debt to you, I imagine."

"He must have learned that his heir has been sighted with Potter." Severus does not look angry, nor betrayed. Instead, glimmering in his dark eyes is pity, and understanding, and even a strange, brittle warmth. "Lucius is not a good man, but he cares strongly for Draco."

"The Dark Lord will kill you for the Wand, as we'd feared."

"As he did, in another life," Severus reminds Percy gently. If his tone had been harsh, perhaps Percy would have found this knowledge easier to bear. As if were, the idea of losing Severus,

so needlessly, so close to the end…he feels a strange pang in his chest, all the stranger for its cause. Severus has never been *nice* to Percy, except for when he'd tried to protect Percy's siblings, or when he'd come to check on Percy, or when he'd threatened Tom for Percy. Severus is not *nice*, but he'd welcomed Percy into his home, and made him oatmeal with fresh berries, and tutored him, and pushed him, and gave him courage and strength.

"No," Percy says, and Severus glances up, his face registering surprise at the ice in Percy's tone. "No, Severus. Not like this."

"But—"

"We do not need the prophecy," says Percy with finality. "We cannot justify realising so belatedly that Trelawney, under your supervision, was in fact the true Seer. We will tell the Dark Lord that Harry has the Elder Wand."

"Did I misspeak? Lucius has gone to Grindelwald," Severus bites out. "Grindelwald has told him Dumbledore was the wand's master."

"But Dumbledore did not kill Grindelwald, so it follows logically that one must not kill someone to confer wand ownership," Percy says, not recognising his own voice. "Either Draco had the wand's allegiance—in which case Lucius undoubtedly won it shortly after—or you did. And killing Dumbledore…it rattled you, though you'd thought it would be easy. You hated him so much that his death came as a shock to you. Harry defeated you in a duel that night, but you were too embarrassed to tell the Dark Lord."

"But—"

"—And we will tell the Dark Lord that if he were to duel Harry outright, he will lose." It comes to Percy in a flash, millions of small clues coalescing in one sudden, jagged moment of realisation. "He's lost in a duel to Harry before."

"When?" Severus breaks in impatiently. "In the Ministry? That was no duel."

"In the graveyard." Percy's words begin to tumble over themselves, as if determined to have him trip and sprawl at Severus' feet. "Harry told us. The Dark Lord gave Harry the chance to duel; their wands connected. And again, in the Ministry. Harry threw off the Dark Lord's possession. The Dark Lord has spent the last two years trying to augment his magic through dangerous elemental rituals; he's gone through more wands than any wizard ought to. Don't you see, Severus? He's *scared."*

"The Dark Lord is not afraid of Harry Potter but of the prophecy," Severus protests. "Potter is a boy."

"No," Percy says authoritatively, shaking his head. "I know him."

"I have served the Dark Lord for two lifetimes—"

"—and I have served three versions of him, in this," Percy says softly. Severus falls silent. "He is afraid of the prophecy, but more so of Harry. Harry has defied him many times over.

He is a boy born of prophecy. His father gave him the Invisibility Cloak. His father had a home in Godric's Hollow. The graves there are marked with the symbol of the Deathly Hallows. Oh, Merlin. Don't you see, Severus? We can make Him believe that Harry is trying to become the Master of Death."

"But then the Dark Lord will never attack him."

"We will tell him that Harry will sacrifice himself for Ginny. It's not even a lie." Percy shakes his head with an incredulous laugh. "For years, I've been telling Tom the truth. This is the truth, too: Harry will come to sacrifice himself; the Dark Lord will win; the Horcrux will be killed; the prophecy fulfilled."

"And Tom?"

For the first time, Percy falters. But when he looks across the table to Severus, he sees that awful look of resigned pity is gone, replaced by the harsh burning in his eyes of which Percy is intimately familiar, and far more fond. As it has many times before, this warms Percy enough for him to force out, "Whichever of us is still alive will kill him."

"It will be easier for me to die," says Severus with a rusty laugh.

Percy doesn’t smile, but he becomes slowly aware that he is baring his teeth in a strange facsimile of a grin. "But far less preferable to me."

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The silence of his flat is reassuring, to a point. Hermes shuffles on his perch, and Percy pauses to listen to the familiar scratching of his claws on the wood. Who would take care of Hermes when Percy died? Perhaps Charlie. Ginny, of course.

For Percy knows perfectly well that he is unlikely to survive the week. Even if the Dark Lord believes their story about Harry and the Wand, he will summon Harry to him, and one of them will win, and Tom will destroy the victor.

And Percy will be next to die.

Severus might think that Percy has a hold on Tom, that he would be able to influence him, or even—he blushes despite himself—seduce him. But Percy knows better. He knows Tom. He knows that his use to Tom is rapidly diminishing, while his danger grows.

Percy has been many things to Tom over the years: a tool, a follower, a confidant, an audience, an ally. He has been swayed by Tom, more than once; Percy knows he can be easily persuaded, and that he lacks the sort of essential moral character that the heroes of the story (Harry, and Ginny, and Tonks, and even Landon) seem to possess in spades. But if Percy has only one positive trait, he likes to think that he is honest and clear-eyed, at least in the privacy of his own mind.

Once Tom defeats the Dark Lord, he will inherit the Dark Lord's militia and likely attract a horde of new, eager followers swayed by his attractive, confident charisma. He will have the Ministry already conquered and Hogwarts already controlled. He will have adoring audiences by the dozens and fearful, admiring young men by the bushel. They will obviate Tom's need for Percy faster than they can bare their arms for whatever Mark Tom chooses for his own.

We will be partners, says Tom, and Percy shakes his head, a bitter, fond smile spreading against his lips. His flat is so achingly still and quiet that it offers a cold, thin slice of absolute clarity.

Every single thing that Percy knows about Tom marks Percy as a threat. Every scrap of knowledge, every side comment, every moment of vulnerability—taken together, they comprise a dangerous chink in Tom's shields. Percy wouldn't keep himself alive if he were Tom.

And Tom will need to die.

There's power in a dying wish, you know, says Myrtle, wise Myrtle, dear Myrtle. Percy had not seen Myrtle, at Hogwarts; he could not bear to see her, not when what he needs now is to feel cold and fierce and calculating, like a soldier made of stone, removed from the troublesome feelings that prevent all humans from living their strongest lives.

If Percy is to use his death wisely, his aim must be true, must narrow to the most focused of tasks.

Destroy the locket.

Give the items of the will to Harry.

Keep Severus alive.

Use his death for a purpose.

Tom will be distracted when Percy dies. Percy knows that, too. He does not linger on why; he allows the emotion to float away from him, dissipating like so many others into the cold silence of the room. It logically follows that if he must die, he must die at a moment where Severus (or Andromeda, or Tonks, or McGonagall) can take advantage of Tom's distraction. As for Tom, well...Percy does not know how he feels about Tom. He thinks he knows how he could have felt about Tom, if their lives had been different, if he'd met a new version of Tom, one with the same painfully clever mind and clear, powerful magic, one with the same sinuous grace of his limbs and soft press of his lips, one who called magic to his bidding for magic's sake, and not to kill, or dominate, or destroy.

Alone in a flat he'd paid for with gold he'd coaxed into being from a small, blood-red stone, Percy sits cross-legged on his couch and stares at the empty portrait in front of him as if it is a mirror. Inside his pocket, his hand goes unconsciously to the small grey stone, though he does not use it. He does not need to see his soul, not when he sees everything all so clearly now, as if the truth has been lingering like mist around him while he'd been unwilling to acknowledge the damp residue on his face. Percy was always meant to die, in this world. He tampered with

events that he oughtn't have touched. It is the first maxim of time magic, of all magic, really: magic demands a cost, and typically a cost proportional to the gain. Percy might have saved the lives of his family, though of course that remained to be seen. He might have saved Cedric's life, though he'd damned Landon. He might still save Tonks', and Lupin's, and Colin Creevey's, and everyone else who died at the Battle of Hogwarts.

And he will pay for it with his own life, as he should. What can be created can be destroyed, and Percy had created himself and so will destroy himself too, when the time is right.

Strangely, the thought does not sadden him, as it once had. Instead he feels gladdened, oddly so, like horns are ringing in his chest, like the air is refreshing and sun-warmed and light on his skin. He will be proud to give his life, to end this misery, if it results in a better world. His own soul is full of shadows and darkness and curse-scars. He has no place in a bright new world of peace and prosperity. Better to die with grace and make it count than to limp in shame toward the light.

"*Expecto Patronum*," Percy says, and a ghostly figure emerges from his wand, as he'd suddenly known it would.

It is larger than his raven, far larger than the sparrow that he'd once been able to summon. It is a large, feline form, with intelligent eyes and muscled shoulders, as graceful as a shark as it —she, he realises—dives toward him. She looks at him silently, and he sees flecks of shimmering gold in her eyes among the silver, and he feels unaccountably warmed by her, and protected, and shielded from harm.

"Send a message to Harry Potter," Percy tells her, his voice steady and without hesitation. "Harry. I will meet you at dawn inside the London house. Bring the others. Someone we both care for deeply has been captured. I will come alone, except for the women who now own the rights to the house; I swear this in memory of the map I once gave to you."

Percy's Patronus leans forward, and for a brief, interminable second she presses her forehead against his. He closes his eyes. It is the closest feeling to an embrace that he has had in many years, and he relaxes into it, some of the tension that perpetually hunches his shoulders seeping down into the floor.

"Thank you," he whispers, knowing that these words are for his Patronus alone and will not be heard by Harry. "Thank you for coming when I called."

His Patronus nods solemnly at him, as if understanding his words, and then leaps with a snarl past a silent Hermes and out into the dark, still night.

Even suspicious, frightened Harry Potter will find it difficult to ignore a lioness Patronus.

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Tom comes, as Percy knew he would.

He comes and kicks off his shoes, settling on the arm of Percy's couch with a proprietary air, a position that reminds Percy suddenly of that old photograph of Tom, languidly perched on a chair in the Great Hall. Percy perches on the chair opposite, hoping Tom will not notice that the empty frame is now in his closet, behind his old school robes. Narcissa would probably say that Tom needs a drink; certainly with a flash of his old artistic insight, Percy thinks that the only complement to the long, sharp lines of Tom's lean figure would be a gently smoking crystal glass filled with some amber liquid, horrendously expensive and produced with the manual labour of some creature or another.

(This reminds him suddenly of Tobias, brazenly ordering whiskey at ten in the morning, and Percy blinks away the regret before it can show traitorously on his face. These will be the most important days of Percy's life; he cannot allow sorrow to cripple him, so close to the end.)

"Your sister is safe," reports Tom. He looks up and flashes a smile at Percy that feels brittle and dangerous. "She's older than I recall."

Percy smiles back blandly. He has locked every feeling he has ever had about Ginny tightly away, not to be accessed until this horror is all over. "I wasn't aware you recalled her at all."

Tom produces a theatrical performance of pressing a finger to his temple and meditatively explaining how defeating the diary allowed the diary's soul to flow into his, the diary's memories to meld with his. Percy is not sure whether he believes Tom, but he supposes it does not matter.

Everything seems to be thrown into sharp relief by the sight of Ginny, captured and vulnerable. Percy feels gratitude when Tom explains that he installed Ginny in one of the Parkinson's children's chambers and bullied Cypress Parkinson to provide her with a house elf, but he feels curiously absent from his body, particularly when Tom bestows upon Percy one of those sharp, angular grins that typically makes Percy feel queasy in his stomach.

I am going to die, Percy keeps thinking to himself as he watches Tom. *These will be the last moments of my life.*

"Severus had a *private audience* with the Dark Lord," Tom says finally, crossing his legs and leaning forward intently. “I thought you might know what he had to discuss so urgently.”

"We failed to find the prophecy," admits Percy. Tom frowns, and from the bottom of the deep well of Percy's reserve, he drudges up an attempt at an apology. "I'm sorry, Tom. I really thought it was the Divination professor at Hogwarts, but we interrogated her thoroughly."

"She may not remember giving the prophecy," Tom points out coolly.

"I used the mind magics that you taught me," Percy breathes, leaning forward and unconsciously mimicking Tom's position. "Do you recall those?"

"Of course," whispers Tom, his eyes catching Percy's face and pulling his attention with a jagged tug. "I remember everything, now. Everything about you. Everything about what we've shared."

Percy does blush, despite his attempts to stay in control. The heat in his cheeks startles him and makes him feel off balance. Tom will always be able to ignite that confused fire in Percy's stomach, damn him. For a second, Percy wavers, and he sees his indecision mirrored in Tom's face.

"Severus is going to tell the Dark Lord that he ought to proceed with his plan regardless," Percy says quietly. "The prophecy is likely lost to us forever. We cannot cripple ourselves for the rest of our lives."

"So it will be soon, then," replies Tom thoughtfully. He considers this and then nods, slowly, as if to confirm a private hypothesis. "I am ready."

Percy takes a moment to breathe. What he is going to say next will dictate the outcome of the war, perhaps. He licks his dry lips and then says intently, leaning forward just infinitesimally, "I need you to allow the prophecy to be fulfilled."

"What are you asking of me?" Tom asks sharply.

"Harry Potter is going to come, as soon as we let him know that we have my sister. Potter is going to come and offer himself up as a sacrifice."

"Surely not," Tom says incredulously. "It will be a trick."

"Dumbledore has raised the boy to die for his honour." Percy looks steadily at Tom, willing him to believe it. "He will sacrifice himself if the Dark Lord promises his loved ones safety."

Tom leans back, uncrossing his legs in a smooth, sinuous movement that catches Percy's attention despite himself. "And you wish for me to honour this promise too, I imagine. I must admit, I find it strange, Percy, that your loved ones are so similar to his."

"My loved ones are powerful, pureblood wizards," Percy says, with a bite. "They are Gryffindors, yes; but they are strong in magic, though misguided by Dumbledore. I do not have a lot of family honour, Tom, but I do not want them harmed until I decide otherwise. To restrict your followers to only those in Slytherin House would create a far smaller society than I imagine you'd want to rule over, unless I've misjudged your ambitions."

Tom's eyes are alright with a private excitement. "And what will you give to me, in exchange for my promise?"

"I want you to kill the Dark Lord," Percy continues, not deviating from his plan. Harry must be killed by the Dark Lord; Tom must kill the Dark Lord; and Percy must remain above suspicion, right until the end. "I want you to take over his base of power. I want you to end the war, Tom, and then, I want you to rule *right.*"

The words hang in the space between them. Percy watches as Tom glances up unconsciously, as if he can see them there, and read them from the air.

"And how, pray tell, could I do that?"

"All of the dangerous Mudbloods have been killed already," Percy points out. Now to distract Tom, to keep him busy ruminating on the particulars of his power, to ensure he spends the first—and hopefully last—days of his rule quietly, without enacting revenge. "Allow them to return to our society, though in their rightful place. We need them to fill positions in our society that we otherwise lack. Judge people on their magical abilities, not their family names. Do not kill without cause, or pursue vengeance without a limit."

"You *have* been busy," comments Tom evenly. "Planning out how you'd reign, were you? All those nights at the Ministry, alone with the Minister of Magic."

"You mistake me, Tom." Percy struggles with himself and then stands from the chair, using the momentum of the movement to carry him past self-doubt and onto the seat next to Tom. Tom is very still and very tense, alert like a wild animal, and Percy makes his voice soothing, willing his body to ignore the intoxicating feeling of proximity to Tom's magic. "I have no desire to lead anyone, really. I wish only to be by your side, if you'll have me, as a follower or a friend or—something more."

This time his blush is only partially genuine, and for the first and likely last time, he is thankful for his traitorous complexion.

"But we have a chance to do it *right,* Tom. You will never die; you have the chance to do it right for the rest of time." Percy gives an incredulous laugh at the concept. "To be the last leader our society ever needs. *He* has been focused on the now, on the boy, on elemental magic, on the Elder Wand. You are the only one focused on the *future.*"

Percy pauses here, looking at Tom's profile, but the other wizard is very still, staring ahead at the clear patch of wall where his portrait once stood. Percy has the strange sudden thought that perhaps it is odd for Tom to see this opposite view.

"I am going to die, Tom," Percy continues softly. The truth, always the truth with Tom. "Perhaps not today, but one day I will pass from this world. I'd like to leave behind a more just and fair one, the type of world I'd be happy to be born in. I do not have the power to do that, but you *do*, Tom. Please. Do this for me, in my memory."

Tom turns, now, and seemingly without thinking his fingers grasp Percy's wrist in a punishing grip. "I will protect you," he nearly snarls.

"I do not wish to be immortal," Percy says gently. He hesitates and then folds his other hand over Tom's. He won't be able to reach easily for his wand, but he has the odd sensation that perhaps he won't need it. "It is enough for me to know that I have asked you to do this in my name."

Tom squeezes Percy's wrists tightly, so tightly that Percy can feel the bruise begin to form as the blood vessels beneath his skin begin to break and spill into his skin. Then Tom flings

Percy away from him and launches himself to his feet, pacing around the room, like he'd so often paced in his portrait. "You want me to *rule,*" Tom says, shaking his head. "To *care* about these insipid little wizards and their problems."

"To *mould,"* Percy corrects him. "To remake the world in your image. You are the greatest wizard of our time, Tom. If not you, then who?"

"I will think on this," Tom says almost distractedly, not meeting Percy's eyes. "I need to think…I had not decided what I would do…"

"Harry and the Dark Lord belong to an old world, where a prophecy can rule over all our lives, when in truth perhaps it never even existed." Percy stands but does not move towards Tom. "Don't you want to create a new world, one ruled only by magic? By *power*, Tom, by fairness."

"I have to *think,"* Tom hisses, and without further ado, he disappears from the room.

As usual, when Tom disappears, he takes the energy in the room with him, and Percy sags in his absence, feeling suddenly exhausted, as if he'd run around the Great Lake. In truth, the conversation with Tom had not gone precisely as planned; Percy had not thought that what stymied Tom was an anxiety over *ruling*, or that Tom would think to equate ruling over people with caring for them. It is an odd perspective for Tom, and one of which Percy cannot easily imagine the origins.

Although, it occurs to Percy as he stands in the shower, relaxing into the hot spray of water—*your last shower, perhaps?* His traitorous mind whispers, and he ignores—that perhaps the Dark Lord is frightened of ruling, too. For all of Tom's intellect and the Dark Lord's ambition, for all of their shared disdain of Dumbledore and of the ruling elite class, neither seem particularly interested in changing society in a meaningful way. Of course, by one metric, everyone's lives have changed indelibly over the past few years, but their society now is not very different than how it was before, not in any sort of meaningful way. Approximately one fourth of all graduates from Hogwarts are Muggleborns, and they've all fled or gone into hiding, so their absence echoes in every part of the average wizard's life, from vacancies at shops to reduced staff in the Ministry to emptier pubs after work.

But it is very odd that Tom, who had been so deliberately and disdainfully excluded from the power structures of his world, would not want to destroy the old world and create a new one. Percy cannot really imagine it, even if he takes Tom's selfishness into account. Perhaps Tom believes that anyone worthy of power is capable of seizing it himself, regardless of what manacles their society may clasp on their wrists.

Percy steps out of the shower and wraps himself in one of the large, fluffy bathrobes that Tonks had teasingly purchased for him, so many years ago. He'd never used one before, imagining both Tonks' look of glee and Tom's scorching look of disdain, but he finds to his surprise that it is quite warm and nice and comforting.

Suddenly he misses Tonks, misses her desperately, as he sits heavily on the corner of his bed and clutches at the ends of the robe. And then he's missing Charlie, too, and Landon, and even Henry, the smug, punctilious prat, and Fred and George and Lee Jordan, and Mariana

and Theodora and the soft glow of Hogwarts in the evening. Suddenly he's missing those trips to the pub with Cedric, the surprised feeling of inclusion whenever Percy attended Quidditch games and found himself welcomed after only a brief pause into the collective masses of red and gold, the solitary walks he used to take around the lake, the sticky warmth of cauldrons bubbling in a small room while Severus swooped around authoritatively. And Merlin, he's missing Myrtle, her impish smile and know-it-all demeanour, the way the sun warmed the stones in her bathroom as it filtered in through the high, crystal windows. He's missing Ginny and Ron and even Bill, missing the clamour of the breakfast table as his mother portioned out bacon and eggs with an eagle eye, missing the soft sounds of his father working on a spell, so diligently despite the rest of the family's joking disdain.

Oh, he does not want to die, not now, not when in this life he had so many things he'd lacked in his last life, not when he feels like he's finally learned something about himself, about the realities of living, some sort of truth that sits heavy in his chest and gives him strength.

"You have forsaken your right to choose," Percy whispers harshly to himself, tearing the robe off him, so that he shivers naked and cold in the centre of the room. "You have come here to do what needs to be done."

And so he shall. Percy has always been capable of doing what needs to be done, even if he has often misunderstood what the right thing to do may have been.

But Merlin, he misses them all, and it burns, a little, even as it warms him to know that in this lifetime, he still has something to lose, despite it all.

***

Percy indulges himself with one of the flasks of Dreamless Sleep that Severus had left for him a few months ago, and as a consequence he actually is more or less rested when he blinks his eyes open at the sound of his alarm. He still covers his pale, tired face with a heavy Glamour before slipping his finest silver robes over his head. He must arrive as an authority, today; must corral Harry and the others into some semblance of order, must ensure they listen to the crucial news that he bears. He does not want them to associate him with the pained, pathetic creature he'd been during their last meeting.

Tea, one of his favourite varieties, a strong English Breakfast that he would bring back to his mother, if he ever sees her again. An extended meditation session, fortifying the strength of his wards and wiping away his emotions, which condense on the ceiling of his mental library and loose large droplets of anxiety and sorrow to land perilously close to the bookstacks below. Back in his body, rather than his mind, he writes a quick note to Severus, who is undoubtedly awake as well, and feeds Hermes.

With a crack, he arrives at Number 14 Grimmauld Place just as the sun is breaking its watery rays over the hard shell of the night, the golden yolk of the morning dripping wetly through the sky. Tonks is waiting for him, in one of her familiar disguises. She grimaces at him in

greeting and then brushes past him. A second later, Percy feels the sickening lurch of Side Along.

They materialise into being in the dark narrow staircases of Headquarters. Percy notices with a glance that Andromeda has made some small, but significant, changes. The elf heads are gone, for instance, and the dusty black chandeliers that creaked ominously overhead have been replaced with brighter wall sconces.

Andromeda is waiting for them at the bottom of the stairs, outside the large wooden door that leads into the kitchen and then the parlour. She looks nearly as tired as he feels. “Took you long enough,” she says brusquely, raking her gaze over him penetratingly. “Stopped at the beauty salon first, did you?”

“One’s appearance is one’s armour,” Percy says loftily, quoting one of Auntie Muriel’s favourite sayings, and one that undoubtedly the Black sisters would have heard from their mother as well. Andromeda’s lips quirk in amused recognition.

“I take it you are not possessed, then.”

“Unfortunately, no.” Percy gives a vague gesture, as if to encompass the entirety of the complex mess he has found himself mired in. “Just—balancing multiple appearances.”

“As one does,” Andromeda says, shaking her head. “Come. They are here.”

They walk through the kitchen and into the sitting room off to the side, where a fire roars fiercely in the grate and four teenagers sit silently, waiting for him to arrive. At the sight of them, Percy releases a relieved breath. There had been a moment, dressing at dawn, seeing the faint fingers of the sun claw against the oppressively smoggy night, that he'd been sure they would have ignored him.

"Hello," he greets them, a tad stiffly.

They do not look displeased to see him, though he does notice all four of them are holding their wands, albeit likely for different reasons. As his eyes flick over the four, Percy notices that Ron and Hermione are sitting very closely together on a small couch, while Harry and Draco face off on two chairs to either side.

Percy and the teenagers may have stared at each other all morning, but Andromeda gives him a little shove between the shoulders and he stumbles forward, Tonks right behind him. She takes a position near the fireplace, leaning casually against the wall, while Andromeda hovers in the doorway, her wand tightly held in her hand. Percy wavers with the idea of Conjuring another chair—all the seats are taken—but then clasps his hands behind his back and straightens, unconsciously mimicking Severus’ lecturing position. "Thank you for coming."

“Are you a Death Eater?” Harry asks bluntly, not rising from his seat. Harry looks perhaps the most tired of them all, his hair beginning to grow out into his dark green eyes, the scar on his forehead jutting out prominently. Percy’s eyes are drawn to it. It must be from the Horcrux, of course. Percy wonders faintly whether Harry has discovered what lurks inside his soul.

Percy blinks at Harry, nonplussed by the question. "Not—exactly."

“Draco thinks you’re a Death Eater,” Harry continues coolly. Percy wonders when *Malfoy* became *Draco*.

Draco stirs in his chair. “I said that I am fairly confident he is a spy,” he objects. “I *know* he is a Death Eater. We were Marked on the same day."

“But Ron thinks you might be possessed—”

“*Might?*” Ron interjects. A pulse jumps in Percy’s jaw. He tries to loosen his face, realising belatedly that he’d been clenching his teeth. "Bloody hell, Harry, I think it's a tad more certain than *might*."

Percy attempts a reasonable tone. "I'm not being *possessed*—"

"—and Hermione said you wouldn't have been able to send us a Patronus, if you truly were a Dark wizard," Harry persists.

Percy turns grateful eyes on Hermione, who smiles wanly at him. "It was quite a lovely Patronus, too."

“So are you going to turn us into *Him*, or are you going to help us?” Harry says with an air of finality. “We need help.”

Percy gives up his attempt to project authority and Conjures himself a seat. After a second, he creates two more, one for each of the Tonks women, who sit on either side of them so they are in a flattened sort of circle. “What is it that you need?”

One last second of hesitation. Percy keeps his eyes steadily on Harry’s as the boy seems to come to some private decision in his mind. Percy can nearly see the moment that Harry decides to trust him, whether out of desperation or his own conviction, Percy could not say.

Reaching into his pocket, Harry pulls out the locket. Percy does not miss how the other three flinch at the sight, Ron’s face paling, and Hermione pulling her legs in more tightly to her body. “We need to destroy this. Do you know how?”

For a moment, all Percy can do is stare, transfixed, at Slytherin’s locket hanging from Harry’s clenched hand. It seems to whisper in his ear, a gentle susurration that stirs the hair at the back of his neck and glides sensually over his cheekbones. It sounds like Tom, and Percy feels a great pang well up inside him, a great sorrow. Tom could be convinced to rule correctly, and Percy could rule at his side, and watch over him, and ensure that he does not stray from their ideals...

“Percy,” says Andromeda quietly, and Percy shakes his head, coming back to himself.

"Yes. I do."

“Sirius—” Harry breaks, then, his voice hitching, and some of the bitter intensity leaving his tight posture. Ron leans forward, and even Draco flinches into himself.

Hermione clears her throat and meets Percy's gaze. "It possessed him," she says in a small but steady voice. "He—he wanted to wear it. We determined it needed to be worn, that it needed enough magic to render it…active enough to be opened. Sirius thought he would be strong enough for it."

"We think it killed Regulus, too," Draco says. Percy does not miss the way that Andromeda tenses next to him. He has the sudden urge to lay his hand on her wrinkled one, to provide her comfort, which is odd because Andromeda of all people has never needed his comfort.

Hermione throws a cautious look to Harry and then continues. "We didn't notice at first. He was so angry all the time, cooped up at the house, that we thought he was just grieving Dumbledore's death. But it was influencing him."

"It was influencing all of us," Ron says hoarsely, his freckles stark against the pale, gaunt pallor of his skin. He flushes a second later, but even the glow of his blush is not as strong as Percy remembers. "It told me I was worthless...and I believed it. I…I stormed out."

"We couldn't get back in," Hermione confirms. "Sirius warded the place against us."

"It was my fault," Ron says weakly. Percy watches with narrowed eyes how his brother sends Harry a pleading, apologetic look. Ron was wrong to leave, but Percy still does not like the way that Ron orbits around Harry, how he is still so eager for Harry's approval. "I'm so sorry, Harry."

"What happened?" Percy breaks in, somewhat impatiently.

Hermione picks up the thread again. "Since we'd lost the locket, we thought we needed to find the other Horcruxes," she says, her voice a low-throated murmur that sounds out of place on her schoolgirl form. Although, Percy thinks, looking at the grim, dark look in her eyes, and the alert way that she holds her body, and the leanness of the muscles that flex and tense as she moves positions, Hermione has plainly not been a child for quite some time. "But we didn't know where to look. We didn't have much to go on, you see."

"But surely Dumbledore—" Percy begins, not noticing the frantic shake of Ron's head.

Harry stirs long enough to say listlessly, "Dumbledore told us nothing. Left us nothing, except the bloody diary."

Percy starts at this, avoiding the others as they glance involuntarily at him at the word *diary*, and begins digging through his bag, retrieving the objects from the will and laying them out on the low table. He does not interrupt the teens, and so while they eye his actions curiously, they do not halt the telling of his story. In a way, they seem eager to tell this all to Percy. To tell someone other than themselves.

"And then we all went and got ourselves captured," Ron says, as if to hurry the story along past his failures. "Then Mal–Draco broke us out. He said he didn't want to be there anymore."

Percy gives Draco an impressed look. Draco catches his gaze and flushes himself, just slightly, a pale pink spreading against his cheeks and neck. “Good for you,” Percy says softly, and Draco nods, just once, in acknowledgement of everything that has passed between the two of them, and everything that could have been different.

“Anyway, with Draco, we thought we could get back into the house,” Ron continues. Harry continues to curl into himself on the armchair, breathing heavily, as if he were trying not to listen to his friends tell their story. “And we could, since he’s the Black heir and all."

"But—" Percy interjects, frowning at Draco. "But you and your mother told the Dark Lord otherwise."

"Well, we lied, didn't we?" Draco snaps back, the embarrassed flush deepening across his fine features, until he looks far more like a ruddy schoolboy and less like a porcelain statue. "Mother *did* try, but she did not try to invoke entry as an heir of the Black family, and she thought that the Dark Lord would not think to ask her as such."

Percy shakes his head, smiling ruefully to himself. He wonders whether Narcissa Malfoy would find a way to lie to the Dark Lord in every timeline, and what Tom's reaction to that would be if he ever could know.

"*Anyway*," Ron interjects forcefully with a worried look at Harry, who with every second seems to grow more distant from them, "Inside we found—"

“Cousin Sirius tried to kill us,” Draco says, matter of factly, when Ron too falters at the end of the story. “He’d gone mad. He was convinced that he could use the locket to raise Regulus back from the dead. He thought we were trying to stop him. He didn’t even recognize Harry. He cursed Granger, badly.”

Percy swings his gaze to Hermione, who nods faintly but does not elaborate, except for a raspy, "He called me a Mudblood."

“We all duelled,” Draco says, with a bit of an embarrassed cough. “He stunned Weasley.”

“Oh, come off it, Malfoy,” Ron scoffs. “He Immobilised you in the first five minutes of the duel.”

“But I remained conscious for the rest of it,” Draco snaps back.

“Enough.” Percy looks again to Hermione, who seems to have her wits about her more than the others. Harry is silent, the gleam of the locket's chain glinting as he slides it through his fingers. “Tell me what happened.”

Hermione swallows roughly but picks up the story. “Harry managed to defeat him. He took his wand and the locket. As soon as Harry had the locket, Sirius came back to himself, but he...he was different.”

“Different? Different how?”

“Sad—"

“Guilty—"

“Crazy,” says Draco, definitively—

Harry’s voice, steady and cool, cuts through their comments. “He stole the locket in the middle of the night and then killed himself.”

The other three all flinch again, violently, bodies jerking as if they’d all been hexed at once. Percy gapes at them. His gaze swings to Tonks, who nods somberly. After all of that—after the claim speech and the dagger, after Percy murdering Bellatrix, after inducting Andromeda into the Order—Sirius Black had chosen to die of his own hand. Percy thinks of the corpse tucked away in bed, hands folded neatly over the locket, and shudders.

Percy has questions, dozens of them, but he presses on forcefully. Though it feels like time has stopped in this quiet, still room, he cannot forget that all of their clocks are ticking away with every second. "And Gringotts?"

It is Hermione's turn to grimace. "We—well, I—thought one of the Horcruxes may be in the Black family vault. It made sense at the time…anyway, Draco helped us get in, but the goblins didn't want us to leave. They claimed—well, they claimed we'd stolen the Sword of Gryffindor. They demanded we return it to them or they would not let us leave."

"I *told* them that I'd returned it to Hogwarts nearly five years ago," Harry says grumpily. "But they didn't listen. We had to rescue a dragon to get past them."

"I see." Percy cringes to himself, thinking of the glittering sword in Severus' office.

Hermione shakes her head. "And we didn't even get a Horcrux. I was wrong."

They lapse into a sullen, dispirited silence. Percy can tell they have been fed and showered and are wearing new clothes likely transfigured from Tonks’ old things, but they all have an air of shell-shocked horror that Percy is, unfortunately, rather familiar with.

“I’m sorry,” Ron says again, giving Harry a tortured look. “I’m so sorry, mate. If I hadn't stormed out…"

“If you hadn’t left, you’d all probably be dead,” Percy says, cutting his brother off before he can delve into the regretful realm of *if only*. These may very well be the last few days of Percy’s life—of many of their lives—and Percy does not want to spend them dwelling on the past. Some of his old pragmatism sharpens his tone as he snaps, “That locket is a Horcrux, Ron. It’s a part of the Dark Lord’s *soul*. If Sirius was wearing it, it was just a matter of time before it possessed him. You lot may have been lucky once while duelling him, but if you’d stayed there, he would have eventually killed you all, or taken you to the Dark Lord. You were lucky to get away from its influence.”

“Quite right,” says Andromeda quietly, quelling whatever protest was brewing in Ron’s response. He settles back onto his seat, chastised.

“We couldn’t figure out how to destroy it,” Hermione says into the silence, and some of the irritation in her tone is familiar enough to the occupants of the room that it takes away a measure of the sorrow. “Even Sirius.”

Percy exchanges a look with Andromeda. Granted, the locket is a Horcrux, but they knew of at least three ways to destroy it: Fiendfyre, the Light spell Andromeda had used, and basilisk venom. Surely Sirius Black, heir to the Black line, would know of at least one other way to destroy something beyond magical repair. "You needed to use Parseltongue to open it first."

“We did open it," Harry snaps, bristling. "Once it was open, we tried everything: smashing it, burning it, melting it, freezing it." When he looks up to Percy, his face is already registering his disappointment, already clearly marking this encounter as useless and moving on mentally to the next challenge. “So you don’t know how to destroy it."

"I have fangs of the basilisk, from Hogwarts,” Percy says a trifle tartly, reaching into his omnipresent bookbag and taking out the fangs that Severus had given to him. “Ginny managed to get them to me.”

“*Ginny*?” Harry and Ron say together, but in tones two worlds apart.

Percy nods. “Risked her life for it, too. I think these may work. Can you still—open it? The locket, that is."

Harry frowns at the question but nods silently.

The confirmation that Harry can still speak Parseltongue suggests to Percy he is still a Horcrux. Not that Percy knows for sure that Harry’s ability would disappear if the Horcrux was destroyed, but he thinks that is a fairly safe guess to make.

“Well, open it,” Percy says, levitating a small, curved fang over to Harry. Without meaning to, his voice has taken on a forced sort of joviality, as if he cannot help but strive to sound casual and in control, in front of his little brother and his most irritating of friends. “And then stab it. See what happens. *Stop,* don’t touch that with your bare hand, are you mad?”

“You take it,” Harry says to Ron, not picking up the fang that hovers in front of his face.

“Me?” Ron goggles at Harry. “I can’t destroy a Horcrux, mate. And anyway, it...it affected me more than it did the rest of you.” He turns pleading eyes on Hermione. “Hermione, you do it.”

“No,” Harry says firmly. “I want you to do it. And you don’t know that it affected you the most. You were the first one to walk away from it. Sirius couldn’t do that. Maybe that shows it has less power over you."

“Harry, I can’t do it,” says Ron desperately. “I’ll fuck it up for everyone. Hermione—”

Hermione shudders and turns away from the locket, pressing tightly into the opposite side of the couch. Percy eyes her. He doesn’t know what Sirius did to her under the influence of the

locket, but he reckons he ought to try and find out. Perhaps Tonks can talk to her. “No,” she says shakily, all earlier composure lost. “No, Ron. I don’t want to be near it.”

Ron, for a second, looks at Draco, who looks unlikely to volunteer to go head to head with a piece of the Dark Lord’s soul. But maybe the thought of Draco Malfoy being the one to destroy the Horcrux is repellent, or maybe Ron comes to some other conclusion in his mind. Nevertheless, he nods, firming his jaw, and uses his wand to tear off part of his shirt.

Percy cannot help himself. He grimaces as he watches Ron begin to wrap his hand in the scrap. With a flick of his wand, Percy transfigures the rag into a set of leather gloves. Luckily he knows Ron’s glove size after he purchased him those keeper mitts, all those years ago.

“Thanks,” Ron says, a bit surprised. He slides on the gloves and then picks up the fang gingerly. He hesitates, but the gloves seem to be sufficient, or perhaps there is not any venom at the top of the fang. Gripping the small, curved fang more tightly, Ron takes a breath and nods firmly at Harry. “Ready. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Ron, for Merlin’s sake, the worst thing the locket said to you was that Hermione and I were in love, and I can assure you, that is not the case,” Harry snaps at Ron. “And you already know I’d trade it all to trade places with you.”

“Mate—” Ron begins, the blushes back on his and Harry’s faces. Percy coughs and looks away, noticing that his discomfort is mirrored on Draco's face.

“Let’s just do this,” Harry says tiredly. He sets the locket down on the floor—Andromeda stirs from her silent position to Percy’s left but does not interrupt, though Tonks leans forward eagerly—and, visibly steeling himself, hisses something sharp and guttural in Parseltongue.

Smoke twists out of the locket. Percy recognizes that smoke, for it looks much the same as the smoke from the diadem: thick and grey with undertones of brown, almost sulfuric-smelling as it condenses into a form. He clutches the small grey stone in his pocket tightly, trying to keep his head as the familiar feel of Tom’s magic spreads into the room.

The form, to nobody’s surprise, is that of Hermione. Percy tenses for a second, but the form does not seem to recognise Percy, nor turn to target him instead. “He’ll never forgive you,” says ghost-Hermione, her hair glossy and smooth, her eyes flashing with cruel power. “You killed his godfather, and he’ll never forgive you for it.”

“I’m sorry,” whispers Ron, to the form and to Harry.

“And now he has a new friend in Draco,” continues the figure, rolling Draco’s name sensuously in her mouth. “Draco and I are so similar, don’t you think? We can spend hours discussing Arithmancy or history. We took all the same classes. He’s worthy of my intellect, whereas you are merely—a distraction.”

“Be real, Weasley,” Draco says, still perched gracefully in the opposite chair. “I mean, I am considerably smarter than you, but you think I’d go for *Granger*?”

“Your sister loves Harry more than you,” ghost-Hermione says scornfully. “I’ve been bored of you for years. Your brothers are all more important than you. Poor Ron, last-loved, first to fail. Just give up, Ron, and it’ll be easier for all of us to move on without you.”

“Ron—” begins Hermione, the real one, and Ron flinches violently. “Ron, you know that’s not true.”

“It is true,” Ron whispers darkly. He grips the fang tightly. His eyes are dark with some emotion Percy cannot name, and Percy prepares to stun him if necessary. “It is true, or at least some of it is. But I’m still here. It’s true, but it doesn’t matter. You hear that, you little snake? I’m still here. I came back. So you can jolly well *shut the fuck up*.”

With a wordless cry of rage, Ron vaults himself out of the armchair and dives toward the locket. There is a flash and a bang and an explosion of smoke, and an unearthly scream that sends shivers down Percy’s spine, but when the smoke clears, Percy sees that somehow Ron has managed to stab the locket directly in the centre.

As they all watch silently, the locket begins to shrivel in on itself, the gold growing tarnished, and the chain melting off, until all that is left is a small, silver snake in the shape of an S. Harry leans forward and tentatively picks it up. He closes his eyes, concentrating, and then opens them slowly. “It’s gone.”

“Amazing,” breathes Tonks, the first thing that she’s said all morning. “Jolly good show, Ron.”

“Well done, Ron,” says Percy approvingly, though he has to avert his eyes a second later when Hermione gives Ron what could very well be their first kiss. But he *is* proud of Ron. In a way, Ron’s words reminded him of what Percy felt the first time he realised what his form was, back in his second fourth year. Percy is a bit of a failure; he is arrogant; he is content to hide in the shadows until circumstances force him to act. But that is who he is, and there’s not much he can do about it, so he may as well do the best he can with what he’s already been given.

It’s a realisation that he is discomfited to realise came much earlier to Ron than it did to him, but then again, Ron’s childhood has been singularly unique.

“Not bad, Weasley,” says Draco, unfolding his lanky body from the armchair and stepping closer to the Horcrux. He nudges it carefully with his foot. “So it’s gone? It’s done?”

“That easy,” says Harry, wonderingly. His face is a study in pain, and Ron turns his attention from Hermione to give Harry a deep, steadying glance. “It was that easy, if we just thought of the basilisk…”

“Destroying the ring nearly killed Dumbledore,” Percy points out quietly. “Yet Madam Tonks was able to fell the cup with a single spell. You cannot predict what will be effective for each Horcrux, nor chastise yourself for not realising it sooner.”

“The cup is destroyed?”

“It was in the Black family vault,” Percy confirms, and some of the colour returns to Hermione’s cheeks at this news. “We merely retrieved it first.”

“So—which ones are left?”

“Two,” Percy says. “The diadem.”

"Tom, you mean," Harry says lowly, and immediately everyone's attention turns back to Percy, who flushes at the insinuation in Harry's tone.

"Who is Tom?" Tonks asks sharply, her senses attuned to the undercurrents in the room.

"Percy has been—collaborating with one of the Horcruxes," says Harry mercilessly.

Percy does not look at Andromeda or Tonka. He stares only at Harry, at the angry glint in his shockingly green eyes, at the reddened scar twisting its way down his forehead. "Tom is one of the Horcruxes," Percy says quietly. "The diadem. The Dark Lord kept him too close to Nagini, and the diadem was able to use the shared magic between them to create a form. He watches me carefully, I admit it—but I have helped to destroy the rest of the Horcruxes."

Immediately there is a loud, confused babble of questions, but Percy continues to talk, looking evenly at Harry, searching, perhaps, for a glimpse of Tom behind the boy's features.

"He made the diary, with Myrtle's death. We all saw that destroyed. The ring, with Tom’s father’s death, destroyed by Dumbledore. The locket, destroyed by Ron. Then Hufflepuff's cup, which Madam Tonks destroyed. The snake was destroyed by Tom, when he came back to a living form. And the last—"

Percy cuts himself off abruptly, his chest heaving. Everyone else is silent, mesmerised by his slow, steady count of the Dark Lord's soul.

“And?” Harry asks, nearly silently.

Percy hesitates. “I think I ought to tell you alone.”

The Trio bristles. Draco, curiously, does not react, but leans back in his chair and watches Percy evaluatively. “Anything you can tell me, you can tell them.”

“Even me, Potter?” Draco says smoothly, crossing his arms and raising one pale eyebrow.

Harry turns and gives Draco a look full of meaning. “Yeah. I reckon you’re one of us now.”

Something visibly passes between the two boys, some reflection of some meaningful moment or conversation. Percy does not care. “Harry, I really think I ought to tell you this alone. Dumbledore told S—me himself.”

“You’ve been to his portrait?” Andromeda asks shrewdly from behind him, her voice startling Percy. He turns and gives her a meaningful look of her own, and she nods slightly. She would understand the reference to Severus.

“Once. At great personal risk to myself, I may add. I managed to slip away from Lucius long enough to make my way to Dumbledore’s office,” he lies.

Draco leans forward. “Are my parents…”

“Alive?” This reminds Percy that he has to tell Harry of the Elder Wand also, not to mention still the items of the will. He is already exhausted, and they’ve not even come to the most important bits of the conversation. “Yes. Well, I assume so.”

Draco narrows his eyes, every inch the Malfoy heir. “*What*.”

“Er, before I tell you, I have to ask Harry a question,” Percy evades. “Harry, has your wand been…adequate?”

“What do you mean?” Harry tightens his grip on his wand, which, to Percy’s eye, seems to be his standard holly and phoenix.

“Have you been in any duels?” Percy tries to ask lightly. “With Death Eaters, perhaps, or Ron…or Draco?”

“Of course, did you think we were camping out peacefully in the middle of nowhere?” Ron interjects, his ears flaming red as he shifts protectively—and, Percy would wager, instinctively—to cover Harry partially with his body.

"The Dark Lord is struggling with his wand,” he says, partially lying to cover his interest. “Specifically in duels; specifically with spells like Disarming, Stunning, and so on. Spells that would normally confer an exchange of wand ownership, at least temporarily.”

Harry frowns behind his glasses, his eyes dark as he considers whatever they have been through over the last few months. “My wand has been the same, I think,” he says slowly. “I haven’t been in that many duels, I suppose; not the type of duels that would, er, confer an exchange of ownership.”

“You duelled Malfoy,” Ron reminds him with a nasty grin at Draco, who rolls his eyes right back in exchange.

“I was under duress, Weasley.”

“Odd how you’re under duress every time there’s a duel, wouldn’t you say?”

“Stop it,” breaks in Percy forcefully. He meets Harry’s eyes, hoping the other boy will sense the importance of being honest and forthright. “Did you defeat Draco in the duel?”

“Barely,” scoffs Draco, but Percy waves him aside.

Harry considers it. “I think so. I Disarmed him, but I gave him the wand back. Why, do I have ownership over Draco’s wand now?”

Draco clutches at his wand frightfully, but Percy cannot help but allow a smile of relief to spread over his face. At least they had not ruined this. Perhaps it had happened this way in

the earlier timeline, too; perhaps Harry and Draco were fated to have a volatile relationship, trapped in duels and counter-duels in any timeline. “This duel, it wasn’t a play duel, correct? You were duelling him to win?”

“Since I thought he was a bloody Death Eater, yeah, I was duelling him to win,” says Harry heatedly.

Hermione breaks in, her voice steadier than before, and her eyes clear and questioning. “Why does it matter if Harry has ownership over Draco’s wand?”

Percy hesitates and then decides to just say what he has to say. “Have you lot heard of the Elder Wand?”

Their reactions are interesting. Percy had expected confusion, or perhaps a vague recognition of the type that is on Draco and Andromeda’s faces. The Elder Wand is a legend, part of the tales told to small wizards before bed. He’d thought Harry would be completely oblivious, though Hermione, of course, likely studied the wizarding bedtime stories with the same intensity that she looked through her textbooks before the year began. Percy certainly would have.

But instead, all three of them flinch, and something blazes in Harry’s eyes that look like triumph. He leans forward eagerly and says, “It’s real, isn’t it? It’s what *He* is looking for. I've been seeing things—visions—dreams…"

"Yes,” Percy says carefully. “Dumbledore was the last known owner of it.” He hesitates and then nudges *Tales of Beedle the Bard* toward the others. “He left you this in his will, to tip you off that the Hallows exist.”

It takes Hermione and Draco both only seconds to come to the same conclusion. Percy watches a look of amazement and glee cross swiftly over Draco’s features, before his face screws into a disappointed scowl. “You couldn’t have told me that earlier?”

“I’m sorry,” Ron interjects. “You’re saying that the Elder Wand is real, and that Malfoy had it, and now, what, Harry is its master?”

Percy eyes Ron carefully. “You’re not going to be jealous, are you?”

Ron flushes and does not answer. Perhaps he does not know. Percy may be jealous, if he didn’t know better. Being the master of the Elder Wand was not an honour Percy particularly wanted. If anything, it would paint a target on his head that he had no intention of ever incurring.

“I told you, Hermione!” Harry exclaims, turning to Hermione, who sniffs in response. “I told you. Dumbledore wanted me to have it. He wanted me to be the Master of Death.”

“How do you lot know about the Hallows?”

“Luna’s dad,” Ron says dismissively, waving his hand. “A bit of a crackpot. He tried to turn us in to the Death Eaters! But I guess he wasn’t lying about this.”

“He most certainly was not.” Percy puts aside the question of why the elder Lovegood would even know about the Hallows, let alone think to tell Harry, let alone try to then turn Harry into the Death Eaters, and reaches into his bag for the Elder Wand.

Hesitating for just a second, he hands over the wand. Percy has not tried to use it, nor really even to look at it; it positively emanates negative energy, the type of deep, ancient magic that coats the inside of Tom’s cave. It sends shivers down Percy’s spine and insidiously conjures whispers in his ears.

“Was that what you needed to tell me?” Harry asks.

Percy demurs further by handing over the book next to Hermione, who takes it almost reverently at the revelation that Dumbledore had given this to her.

This time, Percy cannot prevent himself from fidgeting. Harry is grinning, even as Draco sulks in the corner, cradling the Elder Wand like it is a gift straight from Dumbledore. He’s so young, despite the dark shadows behind his eyes. How can Percy be the one to tell him that he is going to die? Severus ought to do it—but no, that would be cruel. For Severus to spend his life protecting Harry, only to know it was all for naught…Percy shudders at the thought. Maybe it should have been McGonagall, who would know how to say the words bluntly, but they missed their chance to confide in McGonagall. Even Tonks would be better at telling Harry what his fate is. Anyone other than Percy.

But Harry doesn’t have anyone other than Percy, and he barely has Percy, considering that Percy is setting him up to die. So, no, Percy cannot prevent himself from swallowing around a lump in his throat, from biting his lip uncomfortably and fidgeting in his chair. “I should tell you alone,” he tries one last time, but he already knows his plea will be futile. Harry shakes his head and Percy just says it all at once, “You’re a Horcrux, Harry.”

Forgive me, he thinks, but he does not know whose forgiveness he needs.

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After Percy’s shocking announcement, the mood changes in the room so quickly it is as if the temperature cooled by several degrees within seconds. Andromeda and Tonks make matching sounds of surprise. Hermione gasps into the silence but covers her mouth a heartbeat later, clutching at Ron’s hands so tightly that Percy notices her knuckles go white. Draco presses himself into the back of his chair, staring at Harry with horror, though Percy would be willing to bet his horror was both *for* Harry and *about* Harry. But Harry…the look on Harry’s face is the worst, confusion to fear to understanding to resignation, all within seconds, the emotions so readily available for anyone to read. He is so young.

When Harry finally speaks, it is not the question Percy is expecting. “How?”

“I don’t know,” Percy says quietly. “Dumbledore told me he thinks perhaps the spell He cast at you seventeen years ago misfired, or perhaps the protections your mother laid down interfered with it. Perhaps it is due to the prophecy. The Dark Lord was planning on using your death to create another Horcrux—the Sword of Gryffindor, actually—but instead his soul attached itself to you.”

Harry’s eyes are heavy with disgust. “I’m…I’m a part of his soul?”

Percy shakes his head. Harry is clearly not like Tom, not like any of the Toms that Percy has ever known. Something about this case is different, though Percy has not been able to discern precisely why that would be so. “His soul is inside you,” he clarifies. “It’s why you can sense him, and why you can speak Parseltongue. But you are not his soul. He did the same to Nagini, but purposefully.”

Harry falls back in his chair, his face looking ashen. “So I must die,” he whispers out loud, and Hermione whimpers audibly at the words.

“No,” Ron says, shaking his head. “No. There’s got to be a way to get it out. Percy, that’s why you’re here, right? You know loads about magic. Hermione—there’s got to be a way, right?”

Hermione seeks Percy’s eyes, but he can only shake his head slowly. “I’ve even asked a Dementor,” he says quietly. “I do not think there is anything to be done.”

Harry laughs tonelessly. “It’s the prophecy,” he says, his eyes mossy green as he stares in front of him. “*Neither can live while the other survives.* He has to kill me, doesn’t he? If He kills me, He’ll be vulnerable.”

Percy still does not actually agree with Dumbledore’s interpretation of the prophecy that Voldemort has to be the one to kill Harry—surely anyone could kill Harry, and that would remove the Horcrux, if that was all that was necessary for victory—but he nods. Percy still has a suspicion, or perhaps a futile hope, that Harry will survive the conflict with Voldemort, whether because he is the Chosen One or because he carries a part of Tom in his soul.

“And after I’m dead, that’s it, right? And Tom.”

“Harry—don’t do anything rash, do you hear me?”

“Every second I am still alive is a second He is killing other people!” Harry roars, the vehemence in his voice shocking everyone in the room. He leaps out of the chair and stands, panting, in front of Percy, a fierce blush staining his cheeks. “We do not have time to waste!”

“Harry, think,” Percy says, taking a pleading step forward. “Let’s assume He does have to kill you. Once He does, it will be pandemonium. He’ll think He won. Everyone will lose hope, Harry. I shudder to think what will happen if the Death Eaters believe they truly have no resistance left.”

“It will be horrible,” Tonks says quietly. “Harry, it will be *horrible*. You’ve not been seeing what’s been happening in the Ministry, and with all of the captured Muggleborns…if

everyone knows you're dead, they'll all lose hope, and that's all we have to fight with, right now."

"If you walk off and get yourself killed tomorrow, that won't give us time to plan," continues Percy desperately. "Look, I don't want you to die. I'm hoping you don't die, obviously, and I'm doing my best to find a way to keep you alive. But maybe you will have to die—"

"Percy!" Ron objects, his face white.

"No, he's right," Harry says grimly. "Why am I special? Dozens of people are dying every day. Dumbledore died to destroy the ring Horcrux. Regulus and Sirius died to destroy the locket. My life is not more valuable than anyone else's."

Percy meets Harry's eyes and hopes that his apologies are clearly written across his face. "I hate to say it," he says quietly, "but if you have to die, you should die at the right time."

Harry does not do anything as immature as collapse into tears, but something slides into place behind his green eyes, and he nods brusquely. "I'm not going to do anything rash," he says quietly. "I will do what I need to do."

"You stay here," Percy says, flicking his eyes at Andromeda. She looks sorrowful but not overly emotional; he would be willing to bet that she will not lose any sleep over Harry's impending demise, nor more than she would mourn for any of them, if they had to die to secure peace. He winces and then says, all in a rush, "The Dark Lord has Ginny."

"*What?"*

Percy holds his hands up to forestall the three worried teenagers that all immediately leapt to their feet. "She will be safe. I can ensure that, if little else. You will receive a summons, soon, by the Dark Lord…in your head, I'd wager. You must come to that meeting prepared to… well, prepared to die. The Dark Lord must not know that you know that you are a Horcrux."

"He doesn't know, does he," says Harry shrewdly.

Percy shakes his head. "And he cannot know, do you understand? Dumbledore was insistent that the Dark Lord be the one to…kill you." He forces the words out despite the ache that is beginning to build in his chest. "When that happens, Tom will kill the Dark Lord; he is waiting only for the prophecy to be fulfilled. The second that Tom defeats the Dark Lord, any of us that is able must try and kill Tom. But we must be careful. Tom is the most powerful wizard I've ever met, and so you must not engage with him lightly."

Percy meets all of their gazes steadily, one after the other, beginning with Tonks, who blazes fiercely at him, and ending with Andromeda, who nods soberly. Andromeda understands what he is saying: that it will likely be up to her, or any of the other adult wizards, to destroy Tom, perhaps at the cost of their lives.

"I am sorry," Percy says one last time, now looking only at Harry. "I wish this were not true. I wish I was not the one that had to tell you. Despite what you all may believe, I have never

wanted to betray you. In fact, I have been working to help you for many years, though I pretended otherwise."

Harry nods, silently. "You didn't have to tell me the rest of it," he observes quietly. "You could have told me that Ginny was captured, and you would have known I would come."

"Yes." Percy gives the faintest of shrugs. "But you deserve to go to your death with the understanding of what it will accomplish."

Hermione gives a little sob, and Ron clutches her tightly, both of them looking desperately at Harry, who gives a strangely calm nod at these words. "Thank you."

And Percy, for perhaps the first time in his life, feels suddenly that he understands the Boy Who Lived.

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Percy had identified several key tasks to complete over the next twenty four hours—he wanted to ask Severus to speak to McGonagall, to warn her and the other trustworthy professors to be on guard for a possible intrusion; he hoped to brew some emergency potions to bring to battle; he needed to repair his brittle Occlumency shields, fluttering in the wind after that emotional confrontation; and he'd planned to speak to Yaxley and Nott, to glean any last insights over what may be occurring out of his field of vision.

And Tom, of course. Percy wanted to talk to Tom.

But the Dark Lord, perhaps also envisioning a long list of mischief Percy could get up to in twenty four hours, summons him just hours after he returns to his flat.

"I thought you would be interested in looking after your sister personally," says Voldemort magnanimously.

"Thank you, my Lord." Percy presses his head to the floor for an extra second in silent supplication before he raises it. He does not think Ginny will be hurt, though this undoubtedly will be a frightening experience for her, and he has *so many things to do…!*

Voldemort smiles his lipless smile, perhaps catching a glimpse of the frustration roiling through Percy's mind. "Do not fret, Percival," he chides. "You will have a part to play, in this battle and in battles thereafter."

"Yes, my Lord." Percy stands at a nod from the Dark Lord, though he keeps his hands folded and his head slightly bowed. Voldemort surveys him silently.

Percy immediately begins to sweat, though he does not feel any pressure into his mind. No, whatever Voldemort seems to be seeking from him is purely visual, in the cut of the same silver robes he'd been wearing earlier, in the lines of his tired face.

"This war has not been easy on you," Voldemort observes. "But it has been good for you, too."

Percy flinches despite himself, the observation searing. "My Lord?"

"I remember how you crawled in here, the first time," Voldemort says meditatively. Percy stands very still, unsure of how to deal with the Dark Lord in this mood. In this way he is different from Tom, particularly now that Tom has melded, in some way, with his younger self. Voldemort at times reminds Percy of Severus; when he is not in a cruel, violent mood, he has a mature, academic sort of air that is uncomfortably familiar. "You could barely stand. And then your fine performance at the Marking, of course—that was when I began to take note of you."

Voldemort pauses expectantly, so Percy says obediently, "Thank you, my Lord."

"So many of them are so *dull*," Voldemort says with a sigh. *So many of them are so easy to kill,* says Tom, in Percy's memories. "They snivel and they bow and they long pathetically for my acclaim. I admit I had hoped for more from pureblood society's finest."

"Perhaps a failing in education, my Lord," Percy suggests, interested despite himself.

"You are one of the few wizards I've met that dare to speak like that to me," Voldemort comments coolly, but Percy is waiting for the dangerous shift in magic, and he tentatively relaxes when it does not come. "Severus, of course. Abraxas was another."

"I apologise, my Lord, for my impertinence—*

Voldemort silences him with a glance of his glinting red eyes. "This war has provided an opportunity for you to prove yourself—to hone your magics, to determine your loyalties, to take the power you are capable of wielding. You are a different wizard now, Percival, with my Mark than you would have been without it."

"It is true, my Lord," Percy says, truthfully. So this is what the Dark Lord wants today—reassurance, and praise, and gratitude. He straightens, not quite looking the Dark Lord in his eyes but not bowing either, and explains, "I've always longed for more, my Lord: to have more, to do more, to see more. I do not know how I would have accomplished these goals without your leadership."

"So what have you decided, to the question I posed you last?"

Percy cannot help it; his eyes snap to Voldemort's, and a shudder runs through him at the unexpected contact, and the way his magic sparks around him. "My Lord—"

"You must choose, Percival," whispers Voldemort enticingly, his voice low and hoarse. "You can fail me, as Severus has failed me, and Lucius, and the others, or you can vow to learn by my side."

Percy frowns to himself, not liking the strange edge in the Dark Lord's voice as he named Severus as someone who has failed him. But Voldemort is waiting, waiting for an answer,

and as usual there is only one to give.

"I would be honoured to serve at your side, my Lord."

"Good." The Dark Lord sits back in his throne, and only then does Percy realise the gesture contains a hint of relief, as if Voldemort had been worried to hear his answer. "We will conduct the ritual after the boy is dead."

"Yes, my Lord," says Percy, thinking to himself nervously that quite a lot is going to occur when *the boy* is dead, and he does not feel ready for any of them.

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Ginny is ensconced safely in a frilly girl's room off in the East Wing of Parkinson Manor, a room absolutely covered in pink wallpaper and white curtains, a room so completely unlike Ginny that he feels a burning relief the moment he sees it. And indeed, when Ginny looks up to see him in the doorway, her expression seems to suggest that the greater irritation to her is the horrid decorating taste of the room's previous occupant, rather than her captivity so proximate to the Dark Lord.

Percy lingers awkwardly in the doorway, cataloguing every inch of Ginny with his eyes, though her form is unfamiliar to him after so long, so unfamiliar that he cannot say whether her tired, determined look, or the edge in her deep brown eyes, or the small cut on her forehead is due to her position as bait or the trials of the last year.

"I knew her, you know," Ginny says finally, nodding at the room. "Pansy. This is *exactly* what I imagined her room would look like."

This breaks some of the hard shell of tension that seemed to have frozen Percy's limbs. He moves gratefully into the room and settles himself uncomfortably on a white round chair that sits in front of a dark walnut vanity desk. Ginny, on the bed, watches his movements carefully. "They could have redecorated it for you," he offers. "My friend…" A pang, which he swallows past, "Well, I once went to the house of a classmate where the house elves painted the room anew for each visitor."

Ginny snorts, shaking her head. He notes that her hair is much shorter now than it had once been, and a bit jagged, as if she'd gone at it savagely with a spell, rather than submitting to the tender ministrations of their mother. "Bloody hell."

Percy manages to contain his anxious curiosity for five heartbeats, counting them as they thud against his thumb, pressed tightly against the opposite wrist. Then, "How did you—"

"—Percy, it was him, it was Tom," Ginny says over his question, her face suddenly regaining some of its childishness as she bites her lip nervously. "He knew where I was."

"*Tom?"* Percy sits back heavily, his hand leaving his wrist to scrabble for purchase on the girl's vanity. Tom, his face impassive, shouldering Ginny. "What do you mean?"

"I know it sounds crazy," Ginny says urgently, leaning forward on the bed. "But I *saw him,* Percy. I've been seeing him all term—I thought I was going mad—just around the corner, or down the stairs, things like that. Me and Neville, we were planning a raid on the Carrows' office for tomorrow night, we were casing out the wards around their office, and then all of a sudden I heard a laugh, and I *knew* it was Tom, Percy. I remembered him."

Percy watches with his heart in his throat as Ginny shivers into herself. Tom—Hogwarts—the thoughts jumble over each other in his head, and Percy wants to dive into her head and see the evidence for himself. But he is cognisant of the fact that they are likely being watched, either by a spell or a nosy house elf concealing itself in the corner, and so he only says firmly, "You're mistaken, Ginny."

"I am not—"

"—you *will* listen to me." Percy does not like the way that Ginny falls silent, glaring at him mutinously, but he tries to impress upon her the seriousness of the situation in the even tone he uses to say, "I do not have much time, Ginevra. I need you to heed my words well." He sees her begin to frown, registering the strange cadence of his words. "You will not be harmed. You are here for your own protection, as well as to entice Harry Potter to return the Dark Lord's summons."

Ginny stands, her hand flying instinctively to the spot on her arm where her holster would have housed her wand, though of course someone—Tom?—would have carefully confiscated it earlier. "Percy, what are you saying?"

"There is nothing you can do," Percy continues fiercely. He rises from his seat and takes a slow step toward Ginny, wanting to shake her, or bind her, or Stun her, so that she remains safe in this childish room until everything is over. "This is the only way—the correct way—for this war to end, do you understand me?"

"How can I understand you when you're telling me that you're going to *trade my life for Harry's*—"

"You are an upstanding witch," Percy bites out. "You are a pureblood and you have done nothing wrong except for engage in childish pranks. Do you hear what I am saying?"

Before Ginny can speak again, Percy thinks suddenly of the last time he'd really talked to Ginny in any sort of meaningful way. Merlin, she was so young then, and Merlin, she is so young now, sixteen, or perhaps seventeen; he cannot quite remember now. He does not know if it is the juvenile décor or his sudden awareness of Ginny's vulnerability, but she looks like a child to him, the defiant jut of her jaw contrasting the soft roundness of her cheeks. He catches her eyes and holds her gaze, willing her to listen to him. "We had a conversation once, on a train," he says deliberately. She nods warily, her expression complex. "What I said then remains true. You must trust me, Ginevra, trust me to do what is best for our family, and those we care for as part of our family. The Dark Lord is correct in the action he is taking, and with time, you will come to understand why. You will be closely monitored while you

stay here; your compliance will earn you the freedom you seek, once the nasty business that remains is concluded."

Ginny frowns at him, but this time her frown has more confusion than animosity. Percy can only hope that she trusts him, or the memory of him, enough to listen to him. He cannot guarantee that she will not be more harshly contained if she tries to fight, so she must at least understand she is being observed.

Percy takes the last step and cautiously takes her hand. She tenses but does not pull away, and he squeezes it tightly, remembering how it felt when it was small and chubby and inevitably sticky. "Nobody will be unnecessarily hurt. Promise me, Ginny. Promise me that you will listen to me."

She does not respond, and he squeezes hard, so hard that she suppresses a wince. But it is not an angry squeeze; rather, it is a worried one, and perhaps Ginny understands that, for she nods slowly and says quietly, "I promise, *Percival*."

And he has to hope that is enough.

CULMINATION (7/7)

Chapter Notes

> Well, I'm super nervous. My apologies for the long delay — I had a lovely holiday but had no time to update this!
>
> Please let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER ELEVEN: CULMINATION (7/7)

1997 — 1998 (Percy is 21 & 34, Severus is 36, Harry is 17, and Dumbledore no longer lives)

March 1998

Percy, in this lifetime, keeps a running to-do matrix in his mind, like he would do in any lifetime, though over the past decade his Occlumency skills have progressed to the point where his mental matrix exists in multiple dimensions, in real-time, and in a part of his mind that is almost physical. Despite Percy's prodigious proclivity for organisation, the knowledge that he has left far too many things to the wayside is ever-present, an oily film that drips great gobs of stressful regret onto the floor of his mental library whenever he accesses his shields. It is all he can do to ignore the sight of the scrolls and scrolls of the plans he'd once made. He'd always had a vague idea, for example, that *he* would be the one to heroically ferry Muggleborns out of the country, or that he'd find a more effective way to neutralise the Death Eater recruiting efforts than by reporting to Tonks whenever he heard news of a proposed meeting.

There's an entire section of his matrix devoted to his family. He'd wanted to find some way to check in on Charlie, to ensure that the twins were still taking the necessary precautions, to confirm that Bill and Auntie Muriel hadn't killed each other due to their shared residence in Shell Cottage, that his parents were—well. Of these goals he purposefully rarely lingers, knowing that to draw any attention to the errant Weasleys running around the country would do more harm than good, but these goals seem to throb with palpable regret every time he considers them, particularly after seeing how his inattention has put both Ron and Ginny at the centre of the ensuing danger.

There are his old classmates, whom he tries never to think of, and the Order, and Hogwarts students, and the Hogwarts professors, and the growing subset of Ministry employees who are beginning to be bold enough to mutter openly about their discontent with the substandard leadership abilities of those put forcefully in charge, and the *Daily Prophet* staff that recently

went on strike, and the Snatchers that have begun to think that capturing any more Muggleborns is a fruitless effort and therefore they should be enticed with higher rewards. All of these people have their own separate scrolls in Percy's mental library.

The moment that he leaves Ginny in Parkinson Manor—under numerous wards, Tom and Voldemort be damned if they take him to task for his concern—Percy shoves all of those scrolls to the ground, where they sit untidily in a heap. The ghost of Madam Pince shrieks in his mind, but he banishes her with a rough shake of his head. Ruthlessly, he forces himself to cross off objectives, plans and counter-plans and speculations and everything in between. The Dark Lord has told Percy that he will summon Harry to him, soon; the last inert Horcrux has been destroyed; and Percy has given the Trio the items from Dumbledore's Will, and told Harry of the horrid part he has yet to play.

Keep Ginny alive.

Allow Voldemort to kill Harry.

Allow Tom to kill Voldemort.

Kill Tom.

Everything else is immaterial. Of course, if Percy has time, there are second-tier objectives to consider: organising Tonks and the rest of the Order, ensuring the Hogwarts students are kept safely in their beds, thinking through the best way to keep Severus alive—

No. Percy shakes his head again, firmly, dislodging the scrolls that began to hover hopefully in his mental library. Severus will remain alive if he can play his part for a few past days. Ginny will remain alive if Percy watches her carefully. Neither Tom nor Voldemort will risk angering Percy, particularly over a pureblood, particularly over a pureblood *witch.* Percy has far too many powerful witches in his life that would murder him with a single curse if he dared even *think* anything about the inferiority of witches, but he knows that Bellatrix Lestrange was the only witch granted the dubious honour of the Dark Mark on her arm, and Tom has never once expressed any interest nor positive sentiment in any woman, ever. If Ginny keeps her head down and her mouth shut, she should survive. She will survive.

Voldemort, Harry, Tom. That is all that Percy must think about.

Voldemort, for his part, seems keen to ensure that Percy does precisely that. For the next two days, the Dark Lord bids him to return each morning to Parkinson Manor and keeps him so late in the night that it is all he can do, each night, to fall exhausted into bed and try to eke out a few hours of sleep. It narrows Percy's world only to *Voldemort*; Severus and Tom are both nowhere to be found, and though Percy tries to contact Severus via their linked notebooks, his book remains cold and inert. Percy tries not to wonder where Tom is, least of all because if he starts thinking about Ginny's shocking news that Tom was lurking around Hogwarts, he wants to break something, and *demanding the truth from Tom* is not anywhere close to the top of his priority queue.

(Of *course* that was where Tom had been going. Percy knows, better than most, that all versions of Tom are obsessed with Hogwarts; Percy should have honestly found it strange

that *his* Tom had not insisted on seeing the castle at the earliest opportunity. Was that where Tom had been sleeping? Eating? Lingering like a ghost among the students, pretending to go to class, walking the grounds? Had Myrtle seen him? Had Severus?)

But Parkinson Manor is not the hub of activity that Percy had thought it would be, either. Voldemort sets Percy to brewing a few emergency potions (grumpily, Percy agrees, wondering if he can swipe a few and satisfy at least one of his intentionally deprioritised objectives) and asks him to tally the strength of the werewolves, giants, and centaurs that had pledged fealty to their new lord. Percy spends most of the next morning wrangling a series of seemingly unrelated tasks dictated to him by Voldemort: to dismiss the extra Snatchers, to cancel the upcoming weekly Death Eater meeting, to renew his Imperius on Pius, to ensure the Muggleborns within the Ministry are still captive. These tasks are familiar to Percy, and so he completes them quickly and competently. Returning to the manor, he looks around him cautiously. He expects there to be Death Eaters practising their duelling, or final elemental rituals conducted to augment the Dark Lord's power, or at the very least a sycophantic show of strength.

However, the Dark Lord seems content to busy himself with some private research in the Parkinson Manor library. After a miserly lunch provided by an anxious Cypress, Percy hovers awkwardly in the doorway of the library until the Dark Lord motions him inside with an abrupt, almost irritated jerk of his head.

The Dark Lord has *changed* over the last year, Percy thinks to himself uncomfortably, as Voldemort bends his head over a thick tome, as if he were a normal wizard. Percy had taken a seat at one of the small tables nearby, and while the Dark Lord hadn't revealed what he was studying in so many words, he hadn't prevented Percy from catching a glimpse of the title, either. Voldemort is reviewing the ancient ways of channelling magic, clearly thinking about methods to obviate the need for a wand entirely.

Percy can barely reconcile this Dark Lord with the one from the horrid Samhain, or even the one that tore open an entire village of Muggles with the strength of his magic. It isn't that this Dark Lord had *softened*—Percy is still very aware of the Dark Lord's power, of his ability to be cruel, of his propensity for quick, impulsive violence—but that he seems far less interested in wreaking havoc than he had before. His interests seem more academic, more targeted.

And perhaps what is really strange is that Percy is alone in this room, reading quietly alongside the Darkest wizard of their time. (Percy chooses a book on Hogwarts, which he figures he can justify with a variety of excuses as needed). At times the Dark Lord shares something he's learned, and Percy responds as intelligently as he can, and on two separate occasions they have what could almost be termed an academic discussion of some weight. Percy never would have imagined that this is what Voldemort is like when he is alone. Percy never would have guessed he is so much like Tom, like an older Tom. (Percy never would have guessed that he would be so—*comfortable* in the Dark Lord's presence, as the sun begins to set, dispatching brilliant golden streaks to peer through the stained glass windows of the library and remind its occupants that the day is nearly done).

Percy supposes that it was important for him to witness the Dark Lord's depravity so often. Had this been the only version of Voldemort that Percy had ever met, he might be less

reconciled to his mission to destroy him. And Severus had reminded him, the last time that Percy had written a similar thought in the notebook, that there are many shades of the Dark Lord, and he chooses carefully what to show to each follower. This version of Voldemort may not be an *entire* lie, but Percy cannot make the mistake of forgetting what other versions of him lay dormant.

(And it is true that this version of the Dark Lord is far more frightening than the version that Percy remembers from the previous timeline, or so he admits uncomfortably to himself the first night, after the Dark Lord has released him and bid him to return in five hours. This version of the Dark Lord has had the majority of his soul destroyed, but his mind remains intact and sharp, his magic tight and refined, his power unquestionably great. This version of the Dark Lord is one that Percy can very well imagine tightening his grip over society, metre by miserable metre, without leaving any room for opposition.)

Cut off from the Ministry, from Severus, from *Tom*, it is all Percy can do to pace nervously around Parkinson Manor, roaming the halls and peeking into the doors. He spends much of the next morning speaking to Ginny, who tells him in a series of vague half-truths about the events of her year. Carrows, Cruciatus, and the resurrected DA; Percy understands better, now, why so many students had come up to Ginny and thanked her for her service in the war. He wishes he could tell her how proud he is of her and hopes she can read it from his face, from the way that he scolds her, pompous and overblown, like the caricature of himself that Fred and George so often imitated.

The day reminds him of what it had been like in Hogwarts during the OWLs or the NEWTs, which were traditionally held as week-long exams. There was always a time, a few days in, when Percy would feel at odds with himself, a bit at loose ends, three or four examinations completed competently, and three or four examinations upcoming. There is the same insubstantial cast to the day, a kind of languishing haziness, undercut by the keen blade of knowledge that the most difficult trials are yet to come. Percy cannot relax, both because he is still terribly aware of what he must still do (*Harry, Voldemort, Tom)*, and also because the Dark Lord watches him carefully and silently. If Tom does not defeat the Dark Lord, Percy will be forced to swear eternal fealty to Voldemort, in a way that will be far more binding than the Mark already branded into his arm.

Percy can barely eat lunch nor take tea, though he forces himself to do both, knowing that he will need strength and energy to survive another languid afternoon in the library with the Dark Lord. But only an hour after he'd forced himself to tuck away into a plate of roast chicken and beans—*roast chicken*, as if it were the middle of December, rather than the beginning of March, as if Narcissa Malfoy wouldn't have served a tasteful spring salad—and drained an entire mug of English Breakfast tea, he feels the Dark Lord's magic roiling angrily through the manor, and he knows that the afternoon will not include scholarship.

First comes the sudden shock and relief of seeing Severus in the parlour where he has heard his instructions from the Dark Lord for the past two days. Percy cannot help but search for a hint or explanation in Severus' taciturn face, but the other man only looks at him evenly. In fact, his face is so expressionless that Percy begins to buzz with worry, understanding almost instinctively that they are in a dangerous position indeed.

Next comes understanding, as Lucius stumbles through the door, followed by the Dark Lord. Percy tenses. He's intensely aware of Severus' magic, so familiar, so proximal, so vulnerable. If the Dark Lord is here with Lucius, then he is here for the Elder Wand, and Severus may be minutes from death despite all of his prowess as a spy.

Severus takes a miniscule step away from Percy, disguising it as an uncomfortable shifting of his feet at the sight of his old friend. Percy knows that Severus will disavow him until the very end, and he would need to do the same, so that one may survive in case one must die. But even that small additional distance seems to loom between them. Percy has the unwelcome sensation that he is standing at the edge of a cliff.

The Dark Lord stands silently for a few seconds, watching his three followers with a strange, curious smile stretched across his flat, reptilian face. They have all betrayed the Dark Lord, in their own ways. Percy does not know how *he* found himself here, in company with Lucius and Severus. A lesson, perhaps, or a sign of the Dark Lord's esteem? Would the Dark Lord have been similarly interested in him, if Tom hadn't been interested in him first?

Or perhaps all it means is that he will die too, that the Dark Lord has discovered any of his treacheries. This thought, while unpleasant, is oddly preferably to the image of Percy standing by as Severus dies alone.

"Sit, my friends," Voldemort orders, graciously, but an order nevertheless, and they all perch on their respective seats, angled in deference toward the Dark Lord. Percy finds himself on the Dark Lord's right, a position he has never been granted in such a meeting before, and Lucius, directly opposite the Dark Lord in the position of intruder, gives him a sharp, evaluatory glance when he notices Percy’s elevated position.

"*Expelliarmus*," snaps Voldemort suddenly, and Severus flinches visibly as his wand is torn reluctantly from his grip. Percy cannot help but find his attention drawn to Severus' slender, scarred fingers, which he knows from experience are surprisingly delicate and lithe. Severus also carries one of Percy's wardstones in his pocket and maintains a low level shield at all times, as he'd taught Percy to do long ago. A simple Disarming charm should not have relieved him so easily of his wand.

"There we are, Lucius," Voldemort croons, cradling Severus' wand in his hands. "Now I have your wand, and his as well. Surely that satisfies the criteria as Grindelwald detailed them, or shall I go ahead and kill you both now? I am sure you would both give your lives in service, so that I may control the Elder Wand."

"My Lord," begin both Lucius and Severus, in unison, while all Percy can do is sit mutely in his horror. With a dismissive glance to his left, Severus continues in a stronger tone, "My Lord, you cannot imagine I have been concealing wand ownership of Dumbledore's wand from you."

"Perhaps unknowingly," corrects Voldemort lightly. "Isn't that what you said, Lucius?"

Lucius pinkens slightly at the force of Severus' glare. Percy stays quiet, watching, marvelling at Severus' abilities. Percy does not know how to react, would not know how to react, not in such a taut environment. But he knows that each of Severus' gestures are intentionally

rendered, though each seems genuine. Severus' feelings of betrayal are clear in the tense ridges in his shoulders and arms and his anxiety is communicated clearly each time he swallows against a dry mouth. None of his movements suggest prior knowledge of the wand.

"My Lord," Lucius says carefully, though he seems to lose some of his bravery at the darkly dismissive look that Voldemont slants in his direction. Percy starts at the hoarse quality of Lucius' voice, nothing like his standard velvet tones, and Lucius flushes even further. His robes do look expensive, but not new, and his long, blond hair has lost some of its characteristic lustre. The real change in Lucius, however, is the strange, cringing deference that captures his tongue hostage, and Percy suddenly feels a shocking well of sorrow for the downfall of this proud, impetuous man, though of course Lucius has committed several atrocities and personally put Percy's loved ones at risk. If Percy survives, he supposes he can think through why he is able to pity men like Lucius.

“My Lord, I was wrong to flee,” whispers Lucius hoarsely, visibly gathering his courage. He bears some of the characteristic signs of Cruciatus, his limbs trembling softly and dark bruises gathering like thunderclouds under his pale, glinting eyes. “My son…I feared for his life…I was fearful, my Lord, and I should not have forsaken you.”

“You should have offered your son to me,” whispers Voldemort, his red eyes flashing with disdain. His voice is low and cold, and his magic gathers over the rug, the dark, oily taint of it heavy and viscous, as if their feet are moored in wet sand. Lucius flinches violently but nods brokenly, and Percy has to avert his eyes in shame and pity.

"My Lord, correct me if I do not understand. Lucius is claiming that either I or his son has ownership over the Elder Wand," Severus interjects. His voice is heavy with skeptical derision, as if he had not been the one to fetch the wand from the tomb himself. "But the boy fled. Surely that is a sign of his guilt?"

Percy had always vaguely wondered whether Severus would sacrifice Lucius for his own life, when the time came to it, despite any debt that Severus claimed to own the other man. Surely that Severus was willing to pin the blame on Draco suggested that all bets were off in this new round of the fragile game they all played, day after day?

"If my son is…guilty, he need only be defeated," Lucius says intently, regaining some of his previous strength to combat Severus' move. "He need not be *killed.* Grindelwald was very clear."

So Lucius had taken what he'd learned from Severus and Percy and managed to find more of the truth. Percy leans back, considering tensely how to twist this narrative to their advantage. He would hope that Voldemort would not kill Severus, not with Lucius disgraced and Bellatrix dead, not if Grindelwald so clearly was defeated by Dumbledore but not killed. Lucius is likely beyond saving; he will be punished for the sin of desertion, regardless of what knowledge he brought back to his lord. Which of the remaining outcomes is optimal, and what can Percy do to influence the situation?

Percy knows that Draco is with the Trio, of course, but is it better to have the Dark Lord think that *Harry* or *Draco* has ownership of the wand? Or given that they are together, perhaps it

would not matter, if the Dark Lord will bend his mind toward finding either of them regardless of what Percy says?

Once Harry dies, Voldemort will have ownership anyway, points out a voice that sounds suspiciously like Myrtle, floating through Percy's mind. He keeps his face carefully blank as he considers this. Percy's best guess has been that Harry needs the wand to have a chance at survival with the Dark Lord, but equally so, he believes that Harry must be defeated at the hands of the Dark Lord. Narcissa Malfoy had lied to the Dark Lord about whether Harry Potter was dead, which Percy hopes implies that there was some way that Harry will dodge death yet again. But can it be considered a true defeat, if Harry goes willingly and knowingly to his death, or if he does not even die? Percy's true fear, his secret, private fear, is that if Harry does not die, the Dark Lord will not be truly defeated.

Percy glances at the Dark Lord. Percy's magic has long since accepted the authority and dominion of the Dark Lord's power. Even with the Elder Wand, Percy cannot imagine that Harry will survive. But, he reminds himself, miracles follow Harry wherever he goes. Is the right thing to do to take the Wand from Harry?

(But a stupid, hopeful, childish part of him squashes the thought, as he's done innumerable times before. This quixotic part of him believes stubbornly that Harry deserves a chance to survive the Dark Lord. This part of him still believes in fairytales, in unbeatable wands, in miracles, in the legend of the Boy Who Lived. He hates this part of himself sometimes, but the alternative seems so unbearably sad that he cannot contemplate it.)

Harry aside, Percy thinks to himself as Lucius reveals haltingly that he had "secured" Grindelwald as a gift for the Dark Lord, so that the Dark Lord may question him personally, Percy does not want the Dark Lord to attempt to find Draco. That is clear. If Voldemort sets his will toward finding Draco, he will do so quickly, now that the teenagers are housed only behind their own wards, and not the Fidelius, unless Andromeda has managed to levy the same Black family protections that Sirius had called upon earlier that year. If Voldemort finds Draco, he will pluck the truth of the past year from his mind and Percy will be killed prematurely, and everything would have been for naught.

"It occurs to me that Grindelwald *would* have a particular motivation to say such a thing," says Voldemort lightly. Percy can tell at a glance that the opportunity to torture Grindlewald has pleased him. "Without the Wand, we cannot be certain that he is not still the true owner. And as you claim it was not you nor your son that broke into Dumbledore's tomb, we are not able to resolve the issue with any…clarity."

Lucius pales, understanding the implicit threat in Voldemort's words, but Percy's mind is already turning as the constraints of the problem become clear to him. "Well," Percy cannot help but say, "it is a matter of logic, my Lord." He blanches at the oily slick of Voldemort's displeased attention and adds quickly, praying the Dark Lord will not take offence at his accidental condescension, "As you have pointed out to us in your wisdom. If death is required to transfer wand ownership, then you need only kill Grindelwald, and neither Severus nor Draco could be a potential owner of the wand, for Dumbledore never could have owned it." He pauses, waiting either for a curse or a challenge, but the Dark Lord only purses his mouth and gives a short, abrupt nod. "If defeat in a duel is the primary consideration,

however, then I think it most likely that Draco won the Wand's fealty, though in your brilliance you have also defeated Severus to cover both scenarios."

Lucius gives Percy a poignant look of betrayal, which Percy bears stoically. His plan is to turn the attention back to Grindelwald and let Voldemort dispose of his predecessor and save them all some trouble. Percy is already opening his mouth to continue when the Dark Lord speaks again.

"And where *is* dear Draco?" Voldemort turns his full attention on Lucius, who quails at the question. "Surely the head of the Malfoy family can locate its heir easily? You told me you were bringing me the Wand, Lucius, and yet all you have brought me is a captured wizard."

"I have tried," gasps Lucius, sweat beading on his pale, lined forehead. Percy does not envy him this awful position. For Severus to decide to sacrifice an old friend is one thing; for Lucius to decide to sacrifice his son is quite another. "My Lord, I have tried to locate Draco; he is under powerful wards, my Lord…I fear the Order has him in captivity."

Percy cannot help but flick a look toward Severus, whose face remains stony and impassive. Percy's best guess is that Lucius had heard rumours, or seen outright, that Draco was in the company of the Golden Trio. The safest course of action would then be to insist Draco had been taken captive.

"My Lord, I have not heard of such a thing, though I suppose it is possible that he is in the Order Headquarters, guarded by Fidelius," says Severus smoothly. "If that is the case, we will be unable to fetch him until we can bring down the Order entirely, beginning with Potter's death."

Percy screams in his head in frustration. The Dark Lord's pursed lips and the coiled spring of his magic suggest that he is not content with this answer, not when the Wand could be so easily within reach. Percy's baby sister is in the same house as the Dark Lord, and his brother is with Harry *right now,* and every day that the Dark Lord delays is another day for something to go wrong. Severus cannot say anything that would appear too openly self-serving, not when he must not arouse any suspicion about his motivations, but that shackles him from sufficiently convincing the Dark Lord of a more beneficial course of action. That, or Severus cannot see what Percy can see, which would be a worrisome fact indeed.

It may be up to Percy to salvage this situation. "My Lord," Percy says into the silence, his heart quickening. His palms grow sweaty despite themselves, but with all of the practice of the last year, Percy holds his head high. What he is about to say is tremendously risky, but he suddenly, abruptly understands something that he feels instinctively that Harry has always known: sometimes one needs to take risks, to leap without looking ahead, if one has any chance at all at defeating a giant like Voldemort. "My Lord, I believe there may be something we have not fully considered."

Voldemort's attention snaps to Percy, and Percy feels the creeping presence of the Dark Lord in his mind. This type of intrusion is normal, of course, and Percy feeds the tendrils some of his unease as he answers, "My Lord, I think it not unlikely Draco received ownership, though unknowingly, of the Elder Wand," Percy says carefully, not looking at Severus. If Severus disagrees with Percy's plan, he would make it clear in the dark glower of his eyes, and Percy

barely has an idea of what he will say next; he cannot improvise further. “But someone stole the Wand from Dumbledore’s tomb. It was not me, nor Severus, and Lucius claims it was not him either. It could not have been Draco; he was a good student, but he is not a powerful enough wizard to dismantle the wards on Dumbledore’s tomb.”

“What are you implying?” Voldemort demands, all of his attention on Percy, who shudders slightly from the force of it.

“What if Dumbledore planned to give Potter the Wand?” Percy whispers. “The boy was there, in the tower; they had returned from a private mission where the boy left the grounds; he chased Severus away, howling with anger…my Lord, Dumbledore could have left him instructions on how to enter his tomb, on how to retrieve the Elder Wand…"

Lucius draws himself up to his full height and snaps, “If you are implying that my *son* aided Potter against the Dark Lord—”

“Most likely, Draco knew nothing,” Percy continues, over Lucius’ anger. If Lucius cannot see that Percy is helping him, that is his own funeral. “But if Draco *did* have the Wand, perhaps Dumbledore told Potter that he had to defeat Draco…perhaps Draco was seeking the boy to bring him to you, my Lord, and Potter saw his opportunity.”

“Why would Draco have sought the boy?” Lucius scoffs incredulously.

“Because the Malfoy family was in disgrace,” Severus stirs himself long enough to snap. “Draco cares strongly for the honour of the Malfoy name, as we both know, Lucius.” Lucius subsides angrily, and Severus continues, looking carefully at the Dark Lord, “He would have known you were looking for him, my Lord, and as he was Potter’s schoolmate, he may have had an idea of where the boy was hiding and thought that by bringing him to you, he would…recompense some of the shame from Lucius’ failings. All it would take was for Potter to defeat Draco in a duel, and the wand ownership would be complete.”

“But Severus tells me that Potter’s skill with magic is questionable at best,” says Voldemort thoughtfully, and more than a bit dangerously. But Percy can tell that this version of events has caught hold in Voldemort’s mind, that the idea that Dumbledore would have prepared for his death and passed the knowledge of the Elder Wand to Harry, that Draco could have feasibly found Harry Potter, knowing his father was disgraced…

Severus inclines his head. “My Lord, I would point out that Harry Potter has defeated Draco once before, during their sixth year. His skill with magic is not notable, but neither is Draco’s, my Lord.”

Lucius looks almost comically torn between the instinctive desire to support his son and the uncomfortable knowledge that Percy and Severus are, in their own way, protecting Draco. Percy ignores Lucius, focusing instead on Severus, his dark hair falling into his face as he leans forward in his chair. So Severus has decided to bolster Percy’s plan. Whether he supports Percy’s improvisation or not is irrelevant at this point; by speaking, Percy has set them on a course, and they can now only hope that they remain straight and true.

“My Lord, you do not need the Elder Wand to defeat the boy,” Percy continues enticingly. “It seems more likely than not that he has the ownership anyway, and if you kill him, you will have its power regardless.”

“*Power that he knows not*,” Voldemort says quietly, almost to himself.

Percy swallows and says, nearly silently, so that Voldemort leans toward him despite himself, a trick that Percy had learned from Tom, “There is no power that you do not know, my Lord. What if Dumbledore planned this as a distraction, knowing you'd learn of the Wand? What if he never had it at all? My Lord, he was defeated by a sixth year student; if he had the Elder Wand, surely he would have been able to protect himself?"

Percy has watched Tom, more than once, be distracted by a thought by another, batting at the ideas in the air like a cat warring with centaurflies. Voldemort is no different; his eyes gleam at this new idea, and Percy can almost visibly see how Draco leaves his mind, to be replaced with this new angle of Dumbledore’s infinite cunning. Mouth dry, Percy adds another hook for Voldemort to catch himself on, another fly to buzz loudly through the air. "I have suspected that perhaps Dumbledore was already dying."

Percy intentionally looks only at the Dark Lord, feeling Severus’ gaze scald over his cheek. Percy cannot look at Severus, cannot doubt himself now. He is acting purely on instinct, on instinct honed by several years of misleading Tom, on instinct that he has understood the undercurrents of the room and can prevent all of them from capsizing if he acts very carefully to steer their vessel toward safety.

With the mood that Voldemort is in, he is liable to kill Lucius and Severus both; their lives are only contingent on Voldemort believing that Grindelwald was telling the truth about the Wand, which Percy would not rely on. And what Percy had said to Severus still feels true; Voldemort is afraid of duelling with Harry, afraid of raising his wand against him. What if he believes that Harry has the Elder Wand and changes his plan? At long last, after eleven lengthy years, they have Voldemort exactly where they need, and Percy has the chance to arrange a final confrontation without a violent, unpredictable Final Battle.

First steps first, and then the second, he's been telling himself for years, and now at long last he must make the second move.

"My Lord, his hand was blackened and cursed," Percy says quietly, his attention focused fully on the Dark Lord, who stares back at him forcefully, their gazes joined like thick strands of rope twisting between them. "He must have been weakened by his confrontation with you at the Ministry.”

"My Lord, he asked me for many options to alleviate pain," Severus interjects. Percy wants to sag in relief, but keeps himself firm, crossing his toes anxiously inside his boots. Whether this had been the right approach or not was now irrelevant, given that Percy had begun and could not retract his words, so he is thankful for Severus' support. "He was ill for much of the year, as I reported to you."

"What are you trying to say?" Lucius bursts out. "That he *wanted* my son to become the Master of the Elder Wand?"

Percy gives Lucius a cool, dismissive glance that he'd first learned from the other man. "Think, Lucius. He knew that your son was trying to kill him; why did he not stop him? He barely resisted when Severus and Draco caught him on the tower. He wanted to be a martyr, my Lord. If he'd died quietly in his sleep, it would have had half the impact it did otherwise. He could have engineered the situation, knowing the Wand would pass to a sixth year student, rather than Severus, so that it would be easier for Potter to win. And—" Percy adds hurriedly, sensing his time to speak has almost ended, "—think about who he has targeted for suspicion: my Lord, he made you distrust your two most powerful followers, based only on a myth of a wand that may not even exist. We cannot forget we have only Grindelwald's word that his wand was that of legend."

Here Percy ends, his chest heaving, bowing his head both to show respect and to avoid revealing his face. The silence that stretches on is one of the longest of Percy's life, and he waits in agony to see if the Dark Lord has bought the story, or if they will be punished for any of their parts in it.

"Perhaps the Wand was never in his tomb," says Voldemort finally, and Percy tenses, sensing a victory. Voldemort is too caught up in the idea of the Elder Wand to accept Percy's hints that it may be only myth. The next best outcome is for him to think Dumbledore or Harry has the wand and forget about Draco entirely. "He wanted to play me for a fool."

"Nobody can play you like a fool, my Lord," dares Percy, and Severus makes a murmured noise of assent.

Now Severus, his voice like silvered smoke. Percy is reminded that Severus too has known many versions of the Dark Lord, that the Dark Lord trusts him above all other Death Eaters. "Kill the boy tomorrow. My Lord, the prophecy, the wand, the legacy of the Chosen One—they are all inventions of Dumbledore intended to protect the boy from your attention. You need nothing to defeat the boy save your own magic."

And then Lucius, angry and confused but with the career instincts that Percy has always admired in him, speaks with some of his characteristic velvet. "My Lord, I will devote my life to finding you the Elder Wand once the boy is dead, in apology for my cowardice."

Voldemort surveys all three of them, Severus, Lucius, and Percy, and finally he nods. "Tomorrow, we kill Harry Potter," he says, and Percy feels a bubble of relief, fragile and shining, begin to grow inside him.

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Severus manages to escape with Percy for precisely fifteen minutes after they are dismissed, cautiously triumphant, though still tensely on edge. They take quick, hurried steps out of Parkinson Manor, huddling together outside a large beech tree, while Severus lights a Muggle cigarette and pretends to smoke it.

"We all have vices," he says when he sees Percy's look. "This has long since been an alleged one of mine. Now quickly. We do not have much time. The Dark Lord will summon me to him soon."

"Severus—"

"He may still decide to kill me," Severus says, as if it were inevitable, the truth harsh and stark and terrible. He forestalls Percy's instinctive objection with an ironic twist of his lips. "There is nothing either of us can do, and we need not waste time confirming that. You have done admirably to redirect his focus to the boy; that is your task now, and you must not falter."

"So why are we here?" Percy snaps, anxious and heartsick and still reeling from the shock of the last hour. "To say our goodbyes?"

Severus gives Percy a softly amused look which is somehow more intimate than a goodbye truly would be. "I have studied the Stone the entire year," he says, cupping his hands around the cigarette to mask his words, or perhaps lend an air of authenticity to the disguise. "There is no Elixir of Life."

Percy blinks. His hand sneaks to his pocket, where the Dementor's small grey stone is safely ensconced with a light Sticking Charm. "What?"

"The properties that we derived for the Philosopher's Stone, the ones in the exercises we completed," Severus says impatiently. "They do not match the Stone's reality."

After the disappointing discussion with Flamel, Percy had thrust the idea of immortality from his mind entirely, choosing to think of the Stone only as a receptacle of gold. Severus had been ferrying gold to him at regular intervals, which he'd obediently passed along to Tonks. "You wanted to be immortal?" Percy asks, stupidly. When Severus had brushed past him as they exited and skillfully redirected them past the Apparation point to the outside grounds, Percy had thought he'd scold Percy for the twisted, convoluted series of ideas he'd given the Dark Lord. At Severus' frown, he hastens to add, "I gave you the Stone to protect you, Severus. I am not…judging you for your wish."

The same softly amused look, like Severus is aware of a joke that Percy should know too. "Not for me, but for the boy."

"Oh." Percy becomes abruptly aware of the punchline and turns away, watching as one of the Parkinson house elves casts an elf charm to water the nearby flowers.

"It is possible to tie the boy's life force to the stone." When Percy looks back to Severus, he sees that the other man's face is strangely still and quiet, partially obscured by the smoke twisting out of the small white tube held in a surprisingly delicate grip. "It should keep him tethered to the Stone...tethered to the Earth..."

"What Nicholas Flamel did was nothing short of a Horcrux, Severus." Percy eyes Severus sideways and then shakes his head. "You can't be serious."

"It will help the boy live."

"Forever, perhaps," laughs Percy incredulously. "Severus, what are you suggesting? You've been telling me the entire year that the boy must die."

Severus speaks over him, his voice steady and even, as if reciting nothing more exciting than a potion recipe for Percy to follow. "It is a simple procedure. I will explain it to you thus. You first take the Stone—"

"*No*, Severus," Percy breaks in, the steel of command in his tone surprising them both. He blinks, resists the urge to apologise, and then continues more quietly, "Severus. I understand the vow that you made to Lily; I understand that to let Harry die stands contrary to the ideals of your life. But you didn't see Flamel, Severus. He was barely living a human life. He didn't care about war, or Dark magic, or our society, or anything other than his scones and tea." Severus begins to interrupt, and Percy says loudly, "*Harry would not want that, Severus.* "

Severus falls silent. Percy notices that he has begun to squeeze the cigarette very tightly. A hint of petulance, "You hardly know the boy."

"I know him better than I think," admits Percy. He thinks of the bruise of pain lingering under Harry's eyes, the sharp flash of resolve. "He's more like us than like *them*, you know. Dumbledore, Tom, the Dark Lord, even Grindelwald and Flamel; they don't understand duty, or hopelessness, or what it feels like to be powerless but have no option save to proceed."

Percy pauses, but to his surprise Severus is quiet, though his famous hooked nose is twisted in a characteristic display of disgust.

"Harry would not want to live forever." Percy shakes his head and huffs out a small laugh. "Nor would he want to pay the sort of price that it would require, even with the Stone. Harry's duty is to die. It's his duty to himself, to the Wizarding World, to his mother, to the prophecy. Our duty is to make his death count. We cannot save him, not if by his death, the Dark Lord will be rendered vulnerable."

"Lily—" Severus begins, and then falls silent.

Percy thinks of his own mother, of her unfriendly looks and raised wand, of his stocking hung carefully along with the rest. Paints she bought for him with hard-earned money and letters she wrote to him, full of every emotion that they shared, anger and love and resentment and everything in between. English Breakfast nearly spilling over the lip of a mug, the cake she'd baked him to celebrate his Animagus transformation. Bellatrix dying by their wands. Percy has never seen his mother's Boggart—nor his in this life—but he imagines that they are similar, the bodies of those they love, the deaths of those they've failed.

"Lily would be proud of Harry," Percy says, gently. "And of you, too."

For one prolonged second, the Philosopher's Stone gleams in the space of possibility between them, enigmatic and full of potential. For one prolonged second, Percy meets Severus' eyes, and sees in them something shocking: unguarded vulnerability, and sadness, and confusion.

"We will do what must be done," Severus says, like a revelation, like an incantation, and Percy feels a shudder down his spine.

"We will do what must be done," he repeats, but his words are a promise, or a vow, the last one he is likely to make.

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Percy is nearly shaking with fatigue by the time that he manages to reach Grimmauld Place, but he downs one of his reserve energy potions and forces himself to concentrate long enough for the Apparation. Severus had left him to supervise Grindelwald's inevitable torture, but Percy had not felt as though he could survive the horrid sight, though the Dark Lord would definitely notice his absence.

"He's gone," Andromeda says immediately, not even checking for his identity when he arrives at the agreed-upon meeting place and triggers her wards. She grabs his arm and Apparates them both inside Grimmauld Place, their insides twisting unpleasantly as they pass through the protections. "Harry, he's gone."

"They're *gone?*" Percy rubs tiredly at his temples, unable to take in this latest piece of news, his stomach threatening to revolt after the unpleasant Apparation. "What do you mean, they're gone?"

"*He's* gone," Andromeda clarifies, thin-lipped, angry. As he stares owlishly at her, she tilts her head toward the kitchen, a quick, abrasive gesture that is both impatient and anxious. "*They*'re still here, though Nymphadora nearly had to Stun them to keep them from running off when they learned he'd run."

"Merlin." Percy has to sag against the wall, resting his arm where the house elf heads used to be. The wave of depression threatens to swell over his head—*you've lost him, he's gone, you'll die and it will be for nothing*—and Percy wishes irrationally for the sharp edge of Tom's magic, or the steady pull of Severus' gaze, something to incite a rush of adrenaline or anchor himself against.

But he has only Andromeda, who steps forward cautiously and lays her hand on his shoulder, a movement so hesitant it occurs to him suddenly that perhaps she is as wary of providing him comfort as he is to her. It is quite frankly ridiculous, particularly since they have destroyed together two parts of the Dark Lord's soul, and he forces himself to relax the instinctive tensing of his muscles as she presses her hand more firmly against him.

"They need you, Percy," she says quietly. "They are young and they are scared. They need you to reassure them."

So Percy does, though his heart thuds sluggishly in his chest throughout the entire awful encounter. He tells them with false cheerfulness of Ginny's captivity in Pansy Parkinson's

room, describing the frills and the colours and the rows of inane children's books, and Hermione manages to stir herself long enough to mutter a disparaging comment about her old classmate. He reassures them that they can find Harry, have always been able to find Harry, but that it is safer to remain here and allow him to make his way back in time, that he just needs time alone. (Ron nods solemnly). He distracts them by retelling the story of each Horcrux's destruction, and Draco asks several pointed questions about Tom, all of which Percy deflects with ease.

They are young, so young that in truth it breaks something inside Percy's heart that he had not known was still whole to break. He remembers them as adults at this age, battle-weary, war-torn, gaunt and fierce and determined and competent. Harry Potter at nineteen had seemed impossibly adult to him, so confident, so knowing. He remembers watching the Trio orbit each other alertly, so attuned to any threats in the room that they were at each other's sides in a heartbeat. They had seemed old enough to survive a war.

These three teenagers do not. Perhaps by removing their battle, he did not allow them to grow that hard shell over their soft features; perhaps a year of failures was harder to bear than a year of strife, and each failure had prepared them for the next, helped them grow.

"Be glad they are young," says Andromeda an hour later, after he has, in a flash of insight, set them to researching the Elder Wand and Ravenclaw's diadem with the considerable aid of the Black family library. *Harry may need any information we have,* he says gravely, and they all nod, even Ron, and do not protest as Harry would have that they'd tried the library already and emerged empty handed. "You are not a parent, but you are an elder sibling as I am, so I imagine what I say is not unfamiliar to you. It is different to be the older sibling, particularly in a difficult house; you wish for your siblings to grow up and harden so that they may be allies. This is your weakness. But you wish to protect them from harm, which is your strength."

Percy smiles bitterly. For some reason the memory that strikes him most clearly is that of Bill during Percy's first year, crunching those nasty kippers, shining and young and so honourable and brave. In this timeline, Bill has hidden out the war with his French fiancée and his great aunt, and he will hopefully emerge from the war unscarred and unscathed. Percy had wanted to protect him, and so he had, but who had protected Percy?

Tonks, an only child, takes an uncomfortable sip of tea. Perhaps she is wondering why her mother did not give her siblings, provide her the opportunity to balance that weakness against that strength. But she says only, "What now?"

Percy sighs, heavily, the kind of sigh that threatens to steal the rest of his breath and leave him cold and inert on the floor. "We must trust that he comes when the Dark Lord calls. It will be soon—tomorrow, he said."

"Why the delay?"

Percy contemplates explaining that Lucius has returned and dangled the Elder Wand in front of Voldemort's face, but says only, "The Dark Lord is preparing his magic."

"What can we do?" Tonks leans forward, forearms on the wooden kitchen table, hair sparking with a furious yellow. Behind her, Kreacher quietly mops the floor, looking far cleaner and cheerier than Percy has ever seen him. He contemplates asking for a cup of tea as well, but his stomach twists in protest.

He wants to do something nervous, to trace his hand around a delicate china cup or adjust his glasses on the bridge of his nose. But he knows by now how to suppress these urges. He meets Tonks' gaze solidly and says, "You must stay here."

"*What?"*

"You are a known member of the Order." Percy turns to Andromeda and says, apologetically, "In truth, you ought to stay here as well. I will leave that decision up to you, though of course, you would not be formally invited."

Andromeda inclines her head. She understands that they may need her presence to contain Tom. "I can hide myself quite thoroughly."

"*I* am the Auror," protests Tonks indignantly. "Top of my class. Percy, you will need me."

"Yes," agrees Percy, who had anticipated Tonks' refusal. "We will need you. But we will not need you at this confrontation."

This placates Tonks marginally. She settles back in her chair and crosses her arms. "What are you saying?"

Percy opens his bag—battered, shielded, as much of a part of his body as his wand holster—and withdraws the scroll of parchment he'd prepared a few days ago, back when he'd had the luxury of time. "This is every known Death Eater or Snatcher, and their suspected or confirmed place of residence, as well as all of my notes on the Dark creature clans," Percy says. He does not hand it over, needing Tonks to understand the gravity of what he is saying. "It includes all of the crimes for which each is responsible, or at least those that I know about. When—*if*—the Dark Lord dies, his followers will be crippled but likely not killed. Do not apprehend them before; I will leave it to you and your mother to work out a signal. We cannot tip off the Dark Lord to what we are planning. The moment you can, move quickly. Get as many of them into captivity as you can, and keep them guarded carefully."

"And if the Dark Lord does not die?" Andromeda asks shrewdly.

Percy does not flinch. "Then you do not act, and we discuss how to best use this information to our advantage at a later time."

A conflicted expression crosses Tonks' face as she surveys the scroll in Percy's hand. Percy waits her out. He knows that she will take it because Tonks, unlike many of the people he works with, is not an idiot despite her willful nature and bias to action. If the Dark Lord *does* die, then someone like Tonks is precisely who should be crippling the Death Eaters, Tom or no Tom, and if he does not pass smoothly from this world, well, Percy may be next to die and he will be relieved to know he'd made his final report to Tonks.

"Fine," says Tonks finally, snatching the scroll so quickly that the edge slices Percy's finger and draws blood. It is surprisingly painful, and he stares at the small orb of blood emerging improbably from his finger. Percy has been tortured any number of times, but this small pain is striking, not to mention distracting.

"Sorry," Tonks says contritely, healing his finger for him. But the echo of the pain still lingers over the invisible wound, distracting him long into the night, after he's bid goodbye to the Black women and the anxious teenagers and returned to the silence of his flat. The Dark Lord has not summoned him; Percy thinks with a shiver that perhaps he is still torturing Grindelwald.

He does not pursue Harry; Andromeda had shown him Harry's note, written in his characteristically chicken-scratch handwriting. *I need to be alone.* Percy does not think that Harry was captured and coerced—for one, any Death Eater would have taken at least Draco for a prize, had they come across the teenagers—and he does not doubt, as Andromeda had, that Harry would arrive when bid by the Dark Lord.

No, Percy feels certain that Harry has gone to Hogwarts, or somewhere equally special to him, somewhere where he can be alone and contemplate his impending death, come to terms with the circumstances of his destiny. Percy certainly would. He would now, if he hadn't spent the last eleven years coming to terms with his role in this life.

This night is the last night of Percy's life, or so he tells himself, staring around his dark and shadowed flat, the too-small kitchen table with the chairs he'd jammed in regardless, the golden goblets on the sideboard, the single window with Hermes' perch. That Tom had not contacted him today only confirms Percy's sad, slow realisation that Tom has come to the conclusion that Percy had known he would. So Percy will die tomorrow, or the day after, or the day after that. His chances of survival are as slim as Harry’s, and he does not have a mythical wand to protect him, only the waning favour of a sliver of the Dark Lord’s soul.

He tests himself against the thought. It may mean he's eaten his last meal, seen Tonks and Andromeda and Ron for the last time, that he's taken his last walk through the Ministry, that he's failed to reconcile fully with his parents, that he will never tell McGonagall the truth, that he will never free Myrtle. It may mean that the sum total of his life is now fixed, and he cannot bias his impact on the world any further.

Strangely, Percy does not feel scared, nor particularly resentful. He feels only tired, a great sweeping exhaustion, like he is trapped at the bottom of the Great Lake and looking upwards through its murky depths, each movement of his arms and legs arduous, his chest a study in suppressed agony.

The only thing left to do is say his goodbyes, and to his surprise he feels there is only one goodbye that he thinks he really must say.

Percy sits at his desk and selects his finest quills from a selection of fine quills. For his ink, he chooses the small capped bottle that his parents had gifted him for his Hogwarts graduation. The cap has a delicate lion inlaid with glimmering gold leaf, and it roars silently at him as it lays next to the creamy parchment.

Dear Severus,

I hope that you have survived long enough to read this message. The Dark Lord will soon summon Harry to him, and I believe I will not survive the next few days. Please do not mourn for me; I have been sure of this for some time, I think, though I have not recognised the emotion for what it is. As you know, I am not particularly strong at naming my feelings, nor identifying the cause of them.

I write this letter in an attempt to convey to you the depths of my gratitude and admiration for the role you have played in my life for the last five years, or eleven, or twenty, or something like that. You have been a teacher when I have needed it, an unexpected partner, and dare I say, even a friend. I hope I have been a useful ally to you in return.

These have been an incredibly lonely series of years. The only thing I have been sure of is my own feelings of doubt and unease. To have you by my side, shouldering this mantle together, has made the burden almost bearable. Thank you for your presence in my life.

Please forgive me for my failings with Tom. I have let you down, and I am ashamed of my weaknesses.

Percy lifts his head from the page, surveying what he has written. In truth, he cannot imagine Severus will ever see what he'd written; if Severus survives the war somehow, Percy cannot imagine he would return to Percy's flat in his absence and look for a message where Percy intends to leave it, hidden in the frame of the now-blank canvas where he'd once painted a life ward for his father into being.

I do not know why Tom affected me the way that he did. Perhaps if I had another lifetime to live, I could figure it out. With only a few days left, I can only apologise and hope that you understand.

He stops again, his fingers twitching with the desire to cross the whole letter out and give up. But this may be his last chance to speak to Severus. It all feels so *insufficient*, these words on this page. What is it that he really wants to say, if he could speak with the freedom of the dead?

Promise me one thing, Severus, on the basis of all that we have shared. Your penance is complete; you have saved the world, in a way, and you have brought Lily's son to adulthood the best you could. Do not mourn his part in this play any more than mine. We have both faced our deaths with clear eyes, as Regulus did, and Dumbledore, and Lily as well, and decided that we would face death in the hope of a better future. I know that such words from me may be unwelcome or unexpected, and I do not blame you for your anger when you read them. Yet if I could ask you one thing, it would be that you <u>live</u>, Severus, free of guilt. Do not waste the gifts you have been given, nor the skills you have painfully obtained.

Please tell my family that I am sorry for the pain that I have caused them. I leave it to you to decide what truth to tell everyone; I trust you in this, as I trust you in all things. Please tell Professor McGonagall that I would have been lost, in this life, without her as a mentor and a guiding force for me, and tell my parents that I was sorry to disappoint them, and tell Myrtle that I do not think I will return as a ghost, but as always, I appreciate the offer.

Thank you for everything.

Percy Weasley

Laying in bed, Percy contemplates what to do with these final minutes. Should he walk once more through his soul? Contemplate his mistakes? Confront the confused tangle of feelings he has about Tom?

It's strange; by almost every metric, Percy has failed in this task nearly as egregiously as he'd failed his other life. Over a decade he'd lived in this new-old body, a decade lived with two decades of foresight, and he'd made nearly all the same mistakes again and even introduced several new ones. In this life he has a Mark on his arm and a half-torn soul, two deaths to his name and several others on his conscience, an intimate relationship with a Horcrux, and the surprising, dubious honour of being chosen to be sworn to the Dark Lord's side for the rest of his life. At the same time, he searches in his memory for that sharp tang of bitter regret, the overwhelming guilt and malaise that had characterised the last days of his last life, and he finds he cannot recognise those feelings any longer. In his previous life, he had regretted what he had not done, a shapeless, formless target that he could not pin down and dismiss. In this life, he knew exactly what to regret—writing in the damned diary instead of destroying it outright, keeping his secret from Severus for so many unnecessary years, not utilising the Order more purposefully—and so he finds it harder to summon the same sadness.

The Dark Lord had said it best: Percy had been made better by the war, made more purposeful and intelligent and powerful. He'd dealt with magic far more complex than anything he'd even known about before; he'd commanded men and saved lives and brought Tom back to life by the force of his own will. He'd spoken to Nicholas Flamel and held the Elder Wand in his own hands. Everything had felt so inevitable to him, as if he'd been unable to make any decisions other than the ones that he did. He supposes that means that he cannot judge himself for his inactivity; the only scales he must weigh himself on are those that measure one's impact on the world.

So no, he decides, reaching for one of the last decanters of Dreamless Sleep. Let his soul be judged by the Dementor who comes to claim it; he does not wish to spend his last minutes in life thinking through what could have been, nor regretting the choices he'd made. At least in this world he'd had the ability to make those choices.

Percy will sleep, and in the morning he will see the Dark Lord defeated, and he will do his best to contain Tom, and then he will die, and it will all be over, and he will disappear to whatever death really is, whether it is a long and cold sleep, or nothingness, or everything, and it will be over, and he can *rest.*

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When he wakes in the morning, it is to the improbable scent of coffee, and perhaps warm bread. For several drowsy seconds, Percy thinks he may be in the Burrow, and the footsteps outside are Charlie's or George's, both of whom are earlier risers than the rest of them. His parents do not drink too much coffee, preferring tea, but at times his mother goes through the whole process of brewing coffee by hand, something she had learned from a Muggleborn classmate. She'd wake before the rest of them and play music softly from the wireless as she ground the beans with a spell before measuring them into a glass canister and pouring boiling water carefully on top, so that the whole concoction frothed up fiercely and filled the room with the scent. Percy had enjoyed the solemn, important task of pressing the plunger down, feeling the resistance of the water mixed with the ground coffee, standing on his tiptoes to beat the coffee into pulpy submission, leaning his whole weight on the contraption until his mother, laughingly, would congratulate him on his strength.

In both lifetimes, Percy had purchased a French press from the antiques and oddities store in Diagon Alley, though in both lifetimes it was used only a number of times before the war built to such an extent that Percy felt unsafe having a Muggle device, even in the privacy of his own house. When the last vestiges of sleep drip away from the corners of his eyes and into the starched white pillows, Percy realises with a lurch that he is in the same miserable little flat he has always been in, and someone is outside making coffee.

His mother? Severus? What would be odder?

Percy swings himself out of bed and slides his feet into his slippers, padding noiselessly to the door and peering out. He has his wand ready and a shield rippling invisibly around his body, though he can't imagine any intruder would let him sleep in and prepare him coffee the Muggle way before murdering him in cold blood.

"I can see you," says Tom, and Percy starts in surprise before guiltily edging into the main area. Tom. Tom is in his flat, making him coffee. Percy takes a seat at the small kitchen table, watching with a sort of detached fascination as Tom directs his magic to press on the plunger. Perhaps he is still dreaming, though of course, he had taken Dreamless Sleep.

"Tom," Percy finally says, as Tom floats a cup of the coffee toward him. "What—why—what are you doing?"

"It'll be a big day today," Tom says, floating a plate with a slice of toast toward Percy next. Percy takes it, feeling absolutely befuddled. Had Tom gone to a shop and purchased a loaf of bread? Where was the rest of it? Percy has seen Tom resurrect a frog and a mouse but cannot begin to imagine him buying bread at a shop. "The matron at the orphanage had one of these; I was never allowed to use it, but I used to watch her anyway."

Percy takes a sip of coffee and artfully manages to hide a gag. It is far too strong and viscous, and Tom had not added any cream or sugar. But he swallows obediently. "Thank you."

Percy has the sudden desire to ask Tom whether he's been sneaking around Hogwarts without telling him, but he takes another firm sip of the coffee to forestall any inappropriate questions. "So it'll be today?" He asks instead, as if the Dark Lord hadn't told him the very same. "You're sure of it?"

Tom nods confidently. "Hogwarts," he says, which does not surprise Percy at all. "He's asked Yaxley and Rookwood as well, and bid Severus to fetch the Gryffindor Head of House."

"So he wants witnesses," Percy says slowly, trying not to let the relief show on his face at the sound that Severus is still alive.

Tom nods, watching Percy with bright, eager eyes. Percy catches the cue and takes another obedient sip of coffee, washing it down with a crunch of toast. "And you're to bring your sister, so that you may be assured of her safety."

"Must she be there?" Percy protests. "The boy will come anyway."

"You may ask *Him*, if you like," Tom says with a heavy dose of irony. "But he told me you must bring the girl."

The Dark Lord likely wants Ginny there to ensure Percy's own compliance, as well as Harry's. Percy scowls despite himself and tries to hide behind another bite of toast. "And you? What is your plan?"

"You'll see," says Tom, self-importantly. The expression on his face has a touch of dreaminess, like part of Tom is already at Hogwarts, watching Harry Potter fall, wielding his magic against his own soul. Percy wonders nonsensically if Tom is nervous. "You'd best be ready. We'll have a lot to do."

"Tom," Percy says suddenly, as Tom visibly prepares himself to leave. This may be his last chance to ask, risk be damned. "Have you been surveying Hogwarts?"

Tom stiffens imperceptibly, his fingers curling into themselves, and the edges of his nostrils flaring like the openings of a cave. But his voice is as steady as usual when he looks up at Percy, a hint of a smirk, and says, “Whatever do you mean?”

“My sister saw you,” Percy says, irritated at once with Tom’s knowing prevarication, too irritated to immediately process the threat to Ginny that he had just introduced with his words. “Have you been going to Hogwarts and not telling me?”

“I was not aware I owed you an account of my whereabouts. Certainly I do not expect you to provide me with the same.”

Percy winces, acknowledging the point. His and Tom’s relationship has always been centred around his flat, or the Minister’s office, private places where they happen to overlap at predictable yet unreliable periods in the day. Tom has never asked Percy what he does with his own private time, and Percy had never asked Tom, the knowledge thrumming unsaid between them that perhaps each party did not want to know. “It’s just—I would have enjoyed going with you,” Percy says in an attempt to diffuse Tom’s suspicions. “That’s all. I didn’t mean to question you, Tom.”

Tom’s fingers straighten and flex, and he leans his forearms on the kitchen counter, his body a study in straight, angular lines, yet reminding Percy undeniably of a coiled snake under a rock. “I’ve been doing more than surveying it.” His voice is brighter, now, and Percy can feel

the exultant swing of his magic rippling through the air. He looks sideways at Percy with a glimmer of mischief and asks, “What is the point of Hogwarts, Percy?”

“What?” Percy sets down the toast that he had still been absently holding. “What do you mean? To educate our youth.”

Tom waves this aside. “You can’t hardly believe that our four founders were so *invested* in our youth to pour their considerable time and resources into a school,” he scoffs. “Come, Percy. Think. What is the point of Hogwarts?”

Percy frowns, seeing that Tom means to pose him a puzzle. What he thinks of suddenly is Tobias, that smoked quail sitting pristinely on gold-rimmed plates. “To influence our youth,” he says slowly. “To teach them what you mean to teach them.”

This answer surprises Tom; he can tell by the quick, evaluative glance that Tom levies at him from under his eyelashes. “That as well, I suppose. You must think *bigger*, Percy. Grander. Why did you use a portrait to save your father’s life?”

Percy bristles automatically at this reminder of his mistake, but he begs his voice to remain calm as he responds, “To augment my father’s power.”

“Have you ever heard of an *anchor*, Percy?”

Percy has the sudden, intrusive thought that McGonagall would be so incredibly disappointed in him, if she knew what all of her careful, intentional lessons had produced in her star student. “I’ve heard the term before.”

“A magical anchor,” Tom lectures, “is something on which to tie your power. It steadies you, makes you strong, and augments your power, as a life-ward does, or even a Horcrux.”

Percy has always thought of an anchor more of a source of knowledge than of power, but he does not contradict Tom, continuing to feign ignorance.

“The Founders built an anchor worthy of their magic,” continues Tom, his expression sliding back into dreaminess. “Every part of Hogwarts is magical; every part of Hogwarts is strong, tied to the elemental magic of the ground. Every generation of students releases magic into the air, magic that Hogwarts uses to power itself.”

Percy cannot help but point out, “But the Founders died.”

“But I have not.” Tom stretches, a quick, satisfied shiver through his body, and turns so that he is resting against the counter with his back and looking directly at Percy instead. “I will use Hogwarts to anchor my magic,” he whispers. “I will tap into my heritage, my birthright, and I will not make their mistakes.”

Percy thinks of it, of the magic that dances through the currents that blow through Hogwarts’ draughty corridors, the magic that sparks through the portraits and the suits of armour, the magic that creakily moves staircases and lights enchanted candles. He thinks of the magic

performed in classrooms every day, levitation charms and transfigured goblets and everything in between, and then he thinks of that magic pulled inexorably into Tom's orbit.

"You can't be serious."

"Of course, we'll need only the *best* students," Tom admits, as if *that* had been Percy's objection to the plan. "I've been doing some surveying this year; it is the first year that there haven't been any Mudbloods to clutter up the magic. There isn't as much of a difference in the quality or quantity of magic as I'd expected, but the students haven't been particularly motivated. I'd imagine we'll have to take it a step further; if we take only the strong students, and we encourage them to practise their magic to their limits, it'll be cleaner, better magic."

Percy shakes his head incredulously. He cannot say why, cannot put it into words, but the thought of Tom corrupting the magic of Hogwarts thus, of choosing students based only on whether their magic will enhance his, of taking the one thing that has stood inviolate in their history through all of time and stealing its power—it sickens him, and it disgusts him, and with a sharp pain in his stomach, it makes him look at Tom differently.

Tom may not have understood the emotions churning inside Percy, but he seems to stiffen in response to some invisible indication of Percy's disgust. He launches himself off of the kitchen counter with a harsh movement of his arms and stalks toward Percy, who is still sitting, boxed in, at his tiny kitchen table. "Come, Percy. Do not tell me that you disagree with my plan."

"Everyone deserves the right to be educated," says Percy despite himself. Even Mariana, who had abandoned all of her elective courses before the NEWTs, or Oliver, who routinely skipped Herbology for extra Quidditch practice. He hurries to add, "And Tom, this could be dangerous for you."

"There is no magic that I do not know," Tom says pityingly. "I am Slytherin's heir; his magic cannot hurt me."

"What if the magic consumes you?"

"Nothing can consume me." Tom shakes his head and leans over the kitchen table, palms flat on the wooden surface, hovering far too close to Percy for Percy's comfort. "You are unhappy with me. Do not tell me that *this* is what will make you betray me."

"Tom," Percy protests automatically, his heart stuttering anxiously as he looks up to Tom's suddenly impassive face. "Why would you even say such a thing?"

"A *sworn companion*," Tom says lightly, but the dangerous sort of lightly, where his magic nips at Percy's heels in warning. "Did he promise to make you immortal? You told me you were not interested in immortality."

Percy can hear all of the unsaid questions as clearly as if Tom had delivered them in that same, even tone. To think that after everything Tom is *jealous,* as if Tom isn't going to kill Percy himself, one day, as if Tom was not proposing that he tear down everything that their society holds dear for his own selfish whims. "I'm not interested in immortality, Tom, nor am

I particularly interested in swearing eternal fealty to *Him.* " He hesitates, sensing this answer insufficient. A sudden burst of inspiration, "Tom, I had to make that promise, and the only way I'll be free of it is if you kill him and take his place. You'll do that for me, won't you?'

Tom considers this silently. Then he clears his throat and says quietly, "You can be my sworn companion too, if you'd like."

Percy leans forward. They are in dangerous, brittle territory, and he does not know how to proceed. "I do not need a vow to be by your side, Tom."

"You may grow bored of me," Tom says in the same curious tone. "You may miss your family, or wish you were at Hogwarts, or go back to your apprenticeship."

Percy opens his mouth without any idea of what will fall out of it. "Why do you always doubt me?"

"I do not doubt you—"

"You *do,*" Percy insists. Perhaps this had been a foolish thing to say, but Percy is feeling reckless and foolish and gloriously alive, perhaps for the last time. He thinks of Hogwarts, as empty and forlorn as the portrait of his father, and then of the sixteen year old boy that he'd once known, and he feels a great wave of sadness lap at the shore. "You wish for me to prove myself forever to you, Tom."

"Why do you not want to prove yourself to me?" Tom snaps back, instantly prepared for an argument. "You've not had any issues swearing fealty to the Dark Lord."

"Because he'll kill me if I don't," Percy points out, acerbically. "I would hope that my actions over the last *six years* would count in my favour, Tom. Everything I've done since I was sixteen has been for you."

Percy cannot name the expression on Tom's face, the slightly bared teeth, the narrowed, almost anxious eyes, the flush staining his cheeks. "You've threatened me before," Tom says triumphantly. "You've made me swear vows—"

"—You tried to kill my father, to control me!" Percy exclaims incredulously. "Merlin, Tom! Are my words not enough? Have my actions not convinced you? We have mistrusted each other enough, Tom. Are you not tired of it? Have I not shown you my esteem for you? What can I do to prove to you that I—"

Here he breaks off, chest heaving, and his heart thudding combatively throughout his veins. Tom's eyes are bright and challenging, and he's very close to Percy, with only a half-drunk cup of coffee and a half-eaten slice of toast between them, and Percy thinks nonsensically of the Muggle Persephone, who'd eaten six seeds of a pomegranate offered to her by the great wizard Hades, and in reward had been cursed to live between worlds, the first known halfblood, able to exult in her magic for six months before returning to the flat, colourless world above. Tom's voice is very quiet, and Percy cannot suppress a shiver. "That you what, Percy?"

Percy does not know what to say. He does not know what he wants to say, what he could say, what he had been trying to say. All of the ways he could have ended that sentence hover between them like wasps, some disguised as harmless bees, and others with deadly stingers.

And then, as if sensing Tom and Percy's shared tension, Percy's Mark begins to burn, a reminder of what must first be completed, before any sentences can be finished, and any admissions can be loosed into the world.

"I'll see you there," says Tom, a small, private smile curling the corner of his lips. "I have something to do first, and I do not think the Dark Lord would appreciate it if we arrived together."

Percy nods, feeling mute and exhausted from their strange argument, and Tom leaves him with the memory of a scorching, searing look.

The Dark Lord, when Percy sees him, is jittery in his own way, snapping at Cypress when the man tries to suggest in a thin voice that he accompany Voldemort on his mission, and clenching his fist at intermittent intervals by his side, as if angry that his hand is expecting to brush against a sinuous body covered in scales.

When Percy arrives, the Dark Lord turns his ire on him, which washes over him like thick, sticky tar. "Where have you been?" Voldemort snarls, and for an irrational second Percy thinks of his mother.

"My apologies, my Lord," Percy says, bowing his head. He has actually come prepared with something, so as to explain his delay. "I was preparing instructions for some of the Ministry departments for a gala to be held in your honour tomorrow evening. I thought you may like to formally announce your victory over Harry Potter and reassure the public that the threat of the violent criminals that call themselves the champions of Order has been neutralised."

"A gala," repeats Voldemort, some of his ire broken by the novelty of this idea. Cypress opens his mouth, perhaps to suggest that they host it at his manor, and Percy cuts his eyes sharply at the door. Taking the hint, the other man bows himself away before the Dark Lord can punish him further. "What do you mean?"

"Well, my Lord, until now we have existed in a state of martial law," Percy explains. "People are growing weary of the fear. Our enemies have been defeated; Andromeda tells me that Sirius Black was killed late last night, and Remus Lupin barely escaped with his life. They tried to free some of the Mudbloods from Azkaban and were set upon by the Dementors loyal to you. Nymphadora Tonks has forsaken loyalty to the group, and my siblings have similarly grown disillusioned with Dumbledore, after the revelations of Rita Skeeter's latest book. The last remnant of the Order may be Alastor Moody, and he has not been seen for months."

"What are you saying?" Voldemort snaps impatiently, but not angrily, which is the key indication to Percy that he has distracted the wizard successfully.

"I thought you may like to introduce yourself as a benevolent ruler, my Lord," Percy says carefully. "Beloved; adored; the very best of our society."

"And you believe people will not revolt, when they hear Harry Potter is dead?"

"Some will," Percy says honestly. "Like how some travelled the streets wailing after Dumbledore's death. But the vast majority of people will be so relieved that the austere methods of the war are over that they will follow you anywhere."

"Clever," says Voldemort, grudgingly, and the praise is as unexpected as anything positive Severus has ever said. Then he pauses, and gives Percy a curious sideways look. "Dumbledore and Grindelwald *were* contemporaries. I do not know how that reporter determined the truth, but Grindelwald confirmed it for me yesterday."

Percy risks, “Did he confirm, my Lord, whether the Wand had truly passed to Dumbledore?”

Voldemort sends him an evaluative glance and responds, “He seemed to believe it likely, but I disposed of him, nevertheless.”

Percy has experienced enough death by now to only nod at this news, unable to spare any sorrow for an ancient Dark Lord killed by his successor. “My Lord, I have requested that Andromeda Black seek out Draco. If he is being held by whatever faction of the Order still remains, she will find him.”

Voldemort nods thoughtfully to himself. “I wish to meet the last Black sister.”

“She wishes to meet you as well, my Lord.” Percy dares to add. If Percy dies in the next few days but the Dark Lord survives, Andromeda would be a good candidate to carry on their mission. “I believe many of Dumbledore’s old followers would like to meet you, my Lord. Many of them object primarily to war, not to your leadership, nor your ideals. I believe they view the loss of life and the perceived loss of their liberties to be…inconvenient to their own personal goals.”

“Purebloods are all the same,” the Dark Lord says, dismissively, and with a hint of Tom’s humour. “You’ll soon see that, Percival. They are so used to being indulgent and wealthy that they centre all of their actions around their comforts.”

Percy cannot help but think of the men gathered around Avery’s dinner table, their faces hard, and the undercurrent of anger beneath their carefully civilised words. “A keen observation, my Lord.”

“You may choose a selection of these purebloods to present to me, at the gala,” Voldemort says with finality. “Now, come. You have done well, these last few days. I trust you are still in accord with what we last spoke?”

Percy sweeps a low bow, one that Lucius would recognise is typically used to bestow great respect. "My Lord, it would be the greatest honour of my life."

Voldemort smiles, thinly, and holds out his hand. "To Hogwarts, then, and to the rest of our lives, Percival."

And Percy is personally Apparated through the wards by the Dark Lord.

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An hour later, they find themselves at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, arranged in a strange square, the castle looming at the top of a large hill, hundreds of students locked inside for their own safety. (Percy had insisted). Voldemort stands with his back to the forest, facing the castle, his red eyes glowing with anticipation. Severus arrives with McGonagall, as ordered, as a representative from the school to bear witness to the day's historic acts. Yaxley and Rookwood stand to the Dark Lord's right, both silent and watchful. Tom stands next to Percy on the Dark Lord's left, and Percy stands with Ginny, his wand on her and his heart in his throat. They all wait, silently, unmoving. Percy glances at the trees, their large dark branches spread between the gleaming grass and the sky, and wonders if Andromeda is there, concealed.

Minutes pass, and then an hour. McGonagall does not say a word, her gaze seeking Percy's desperately, and Percy can only pray that she too trusts him enough to stay quiet during these proceedings. Severus glances at him and Percy catches his gaze and holds it, hoping to convey his great relief that Severus has survived.

Rookwood and Yaxley shift. They are not particular friends, but as they are the last of the original Inner Circle, they likely understand much more of what is occurring than other Death Eaters would. They have noticed Tom and registered his familiar face, but they have not spoken. They have seen Tom transform into Voldemort, and they are prepared to see Voldemort transform back into Tom.

Ginny stands very straight and very still, though her bonds must be hurting. She looks steadily at McGonagall, as though the sight of her old teacher is giving her enough strength to endure the events to follow, or perhaps to communicate to McGonagall that she too must go along with the charade, even if they do not understand what is happening.

They stand there for so long that Percy's legs begin to ache and he begins to wonder if perhaps Harry did not receive—or did not believe—the message that Voldemort had sent. But then, just as the sun begins to depart its position in the centre of the sky, brilliantly streaming light over the castle as it makes its weary way to the horizon, Harry Potter appears and begins to walk across the lawn, Ron and Hermione behind him. Draco, thank *Merlin*, is nowhere to be seen, though Percy glares at the other two, who should have had the sense not to come too.

The electric change that snaps through the group is nearly tangible. All of them straighten at once, all of them lock their attention onto Harry as he walks slowly across the lawn. Ron and Hermione match his pace. Both their eyes are red-rimmed and their eyes circled by dark patches, but their faces are stony and impassive as they trail across the grounds of Hogwarts, walking behind Harry for the last time, making up the only funeral procession Harry is likely to have. They must be confused about the gathering, about all of the players gathered silently for the final move, but they do not say anything, taking their places in the square as if they had planned it.

As Harry draws nearer, Percy notices the ring on his finger at once, and he does not have to look at Voldemort or Tom to know that they recognize it too—though hopefully only as the Horcrux, not as the Resurrection Stone, which Percy now feels certain it contains. Ring,

cloak, wand. Percy does not truly know if being the Master of Death means anything at all, but at least Harry has all three. The rest is up to him.

"Tell me, Harry," Voldemort says conversationally as Harry stops silently in front of him. "Have you ever heard of the Elder Wand?"

Harry cannot prevent his grip from tightening on the Wand, which is clearly Dumbledore's, now that they are all looking at it closely. "It's mine."

"So it is," Voldemort says musingly. "Or so Dumbledore would have you believe. I spoke to Grindelwald last night, young Harry, and he was very clear that he had lied to his *dear* friend Dumbledore about how precisely wand ownership is conferred. The Wand has remained in Grindelwald's control, though Dumbledore would have you believe otherwise."

Harry frowns, and Hermione behind him, though Ron continues to stare ahead with a face twisted in angry scorn. "Dumbledore wanted me to have the Wand."

"It was never Dumbledore's to give. Much like that ring on your finger." Voldemort shakes his head almost pityingly. "Dumbledore used to lie to me too, Harry. He always wanted something from me—and then mistrusted me when I was not willing to give it to him."

"He knew you were evil, right from the start," Harry snarls. "He showed me those memories."

"Did he, now," comments Voldemort, as if unfazed, though Percy can feel the spike of his magic responding to his irritation. "Memories can be so deceptive, Harry. He asked me to be his apprentice, you know. Did he show you that?"

Tom stiffens next to Percy, who cannot help but gape at Voldemort. Harry is equally shocked, but strangely it is McGonagall who whispers, "Impossible."

"Oh, yes." Voldemort has a strange smile playing on the corners of his serpentine mouth. "He wanted to keep an eye on me; wanted to keep me safely within Hogwarts. He was very clear that as his apprentice I would study only what he thought appropriate. He could hardly deny me the offer; I was the best student at Transfiguration that Hogwarts has ever seen."

Had *Dumbledore* given Tom that creamy leather diary, bid him to fill it with a proposal worthy of their time? And that Tom had excelled at Transfiguration, at *Percy's* art, that he was Dumbledore's pick before McGonagall—Percy cannot help but share a horrified glance with his former professor.

"You see, Dumbledore decides who we are when we are very young," Voldemort continues lightly. "How long did it take him to ally the Weasley family to you, Harry? Did you ever wonder how such a poor Wizarding family could afford an extra mouth to feed? You met a version of me when you were just eleven. Dumbledore had already decided you ought to be the hero."

"There was a prophecy—" Harry starts defiantly.

"Perhaps," Voldemort says with a casual shrug, as if he hadn't been hounding Percy for that very same prophecy all year. "Perhaps not. You never heard it from the orb itself, did you? You have only Dumbledore's word for what it contained."

Harry is silent, staring at Voldemort with an expression of pained confusion.

"Dumbledore convinced your mother to enact very Dark blood wards around you," Voldemort says softly. "Wards that could be powered only by a great sacrifice. What a coincidence that the wizard who desired your mother heard this alleged prophecy and came back to tell me who it spoke of, to ask that she may be spared for his own gratification. I gave her the opportunity to spare herself, you know. Did he tell you that? I told her that she may give you up and live, and she chose to die, thus powering the trap that Dumbledore had set, with poor Severus as an unwilling pawn. Had I not attacked you, your parents never would have died, and you never would have had the protection of the wards. He set us both on this path, Harry."

The agonised glare that Harry levies on Severus seems to land like a physical blow. Percy watches with sympathy as Severus flinches, an electric bolt that thrums through his body, as this secret is so casually revealed to Lily's son. But all Harry says is, "Dumbledore was a great man—"

"Friends with the Dark wizard Grindelwald." The Dark Lord smiles thinly, seeming to delight in each word. "Murdered his own sister. Despised Muggles and thought they were unworthy. He hated me at eleven years old, Harry, just as he made you feel he loved you. I had done nothing wrong, save lash out with my magic at the cruel children who sought to make me feel ashamed of my powers." Percy registers at the same time as Voldemort how this seems to mean something to Harry, who stiffens. "You experienced the same, didn't you?" Voldemort shakes his head sorrowfully. "You've hurt Muggles too, I would wager; your stupid relatives, those Muggles unworthy of your care. But Dumbledore celebrated you for the same impulses he punished in me."

"Why are you *saying* all of this?" Harry bursts out, his chest heaving, and the flecks of unshed tears shining in his vivid green eyes like a twisted echo of Dumbledore's twinkle. "Just kill me already!"

"I believe you have the right to know why you are going to your death," Voldemort says, and Percy feels suddenly that he is telling the truth. This is Voldemort scheduling his attack for after the OWL exams, Tom keeping the Dursleys alive so that Harry may kill them himself, both of them giving Harry chances to fight back fairly, in the Chamber of Secrets, in the graveyard. It saddens Percy, somewhere deep inside him that he cannot name, that even as a Dark Lord, Tom would have spent his time researching Harry's childhood, noting painfully the similarities in their circumstances and the differences with which Dumbledore responded. Where does that leave Percy, hovering awkwardly in the middle, able to understand Tom's childhood of poverty and resentment and hatred of Dumbledore, but undeniably part of the same pureblood society that Voldemort so reviles? "Much could have been averted if Dumbledore was honest with us both, Harry."

There is a long silence, where Harry stares at Voldemort, and Voldemort looks steadily back. Once again, it is like the rest of the world does not exist, as if Voldemort is speaking only to

Harry, as if the rest of them are only there as an audience, as accessories to a tale older than them all. "Dumbledore was doing what he believed to be right. Nothing excuses what you've done, Tom."

Voldemort sighs, as if disappointed. "At least you will die with that conviction, if not with the truth," he says, almost to himself. "But now you *will* die, dear Harry. The Boy Who Lived will live no more."

"Let my friends go," Harry says, his voice evenly. Ron and Hermione shift angrily behind Harry, but Percy glares at them, and they say nothing. He will force them all to do what needs to be done, if he has to subdue them all himself. "My life for theirs."

Voldemort sweeps an exaggerated bow. "Once you die, dear Harry, they are free to walk away. I swear this to you." He pauses just slightly and then adds, without looking at Percy, "The war will end with your death. Those who accept my authority will have nothing to fear. You may tell Dumbledore's former allies, or those who disagreed with the premise of war; they are welcome to swear fealty to me. I do not hold grudges. I will not punish them."

Percy relaxes infinitesimally. Voldemort keeps his promises, bound by whatever sense of honour guides him, though Percy cannot say in good conscience that Tom does not hold grudges.

Harry looks at Voldemort for a long second, his green eyes meeting Voldemort's red eyes. He does not seem to notice Tom, though every muscle in Tom's body is clearly tensed, and Percy can feel the tension radiating off of him palpably. It is not in Tom's nature to be quiet for so long, and Percy monitors Tom nervously, like a Healer hovering by the bedside of a patient on the verge of death.

"You can still end this, Tom," Harry says finally, and Tom and Voldemort flinch in unison, as if one crack of magic passes through them at the same time. "If you regret it, truly regret it, your soul will be whole once more. Killing me will not fix you."

"I do not need to be fixed," hisses Voldemort, his face twisted in a monstrous grimace of rage. Tom tenses in anger, and Percy leans infinitesimally closer, as if the heat of his body will calm Tom. Just a few more minutes. Percy can hardly breathe. "And I regret nothing, Harry Potter, save that I failed to kill you when I had the chance. I will not make that mistake again. Say your goodbyes, Harry. You have only seconds left."

Harry lifts his head. His eyes are clear of tears, and his face looks almost relaxed. He turns and looks at each face in turn, passing over Yaxley and Rookwood without recognition, his eyes hardening at Severus and then softening at McGonagall. He looks steadily at Ron and Hermione, and then at Ginny he stops and says, "I love you, Ginny."

Ginny nods silently, her own eyes full of tears, though Percy is proud to note she does not allow them to fall.

Harry inhales sharply and then looks at Percy without much expression. Percy keeps his face equally blank. He is not important in Harry's story; he is merely the executioner appointed to

bring Harry to his death at the proper time. He will mourn Harry, but Harry ought not to waste any of his remaining seconds on Percy.

Harry lingers on Tom for a few poignant moments, and Tom straightens under his enemy's gaze, the tension sliding from his frame and pooling at his feet. Then, Harry completes his circle and faces Voldemort again. With all of the courage that Percy has always seen from their teenaged hero—sometimes watching with envy, sometimes with pride, and sometimes, as now, with a pained sort of resignation—Harry stands tall and unyielding, spreads his hands wide, and says in a firm, even voice, "I am here of my own accord."

"*Avada Kedavra*," breathes Voldemort, almost lovingly, and without another sound, Harry Potter dies, crumpling to the ground.

Several members of the audience cannot prevent themselves from gasping or sobbing at the sight. Even Percy inhales sharply. Another Horcrux defeated—or so he hopes. He shoves aside the thought that Harry has died too, forcing himself to focus on the Horcrux.

"Check on him, Percival," whispers Voldemort, his arms spread. Percy gulps, ignores Ron's angry gaze, and then walks four interminable steps over to Harry. He drops to his knees.

Harry is incredibly still. Percy listens for a breath but hears nothing, and his stomach drops out of him. Part of him had been hoping that Harry would, despite all odds, survive his death, that the prophecy would protect him. Percy reaches for Harry's wrist and lays his finger against Harry's still, silent pulse. "He's dead, my Lord."

"Yaxley, confirm," orders Voldemort coolly, which could be either an insult to Percy or a measure of praise to Yaxley, or perhaps the Dark Lord cannot believe it any more than the rest of them. Yaxley takes the same four staggering steps forward and then kneels besides Percy.

Yaxley scrabbles for Harry's pulse. As his fingers touch Percy's, they both feel it, a heartbeat that echoes through both of their bodies to their very bones. Sluggish at first, and then more persistent, pulsing through the three of them as if they share the same heart.

Harry Potter is alive.

Percy and Yaxley share a single gaze that seems to last forever. In Yaxley's eyes, Percy sees horror and confusion, but before it can turn to panic, Percy desperately slides his hand forward until it covers Yaxley's fingers, and he squeezes his hand over Yaxley's hand and Harry's wrist. In the squeeze he sends all of their shared memories over the last few years, every afternoon in the Ministry complaining about Lucius, their shared complicity in Umbridge's death, their shared presence at that traitorous meal, their shared knowledge that they do not want this war to continue, not with the Dark Lord at the helm, not like this.

"Dead," Yaxley says, and he squeezes Harry's wrist roughly himself, as if to steady himself. Percy feels Yaxley's dry fingers moving under his hand, and he feels the way that Harry catches his breath despite himself.

Percy rises, feeling as if he is in a dream. Voldemort watches him carefully, as does Tom, and Percy summons every second of fear and sadness and hope that he's felt over the last eleven years and uses it to reinforce his Occlumency shields until they nearly vibrate with his intensity. He will not betray Harry, not now, not at the very end. They go back to their opposite sides of the square. Percy meets Yaxley's wide-eyed gaze with his own and tries to bind him to silence over the eight steps of grass between them.

Harry Potter is alive. Harry Potter is alive. Harry Potter survived another Killing Curse. Oh Merlin, oh Merlin, what are they going to do? Is the Horcrux gone? Had Percy damned them all with his sentimentality? Had he come back to the past only for everything to proceed exactly as planned? He hadn't felt anything when he touched Harry, but he'd handled other Horcruxes before without feeling that flash of pain that the locket had inflicted on him.

(Even as he feels Tom shift beside him, even as he looks at Severus' empty expression, even as Ginny and Hermione and Ron begin to tear up while Voldemort throws his head back in wild, exultant joy, Percy feels a sense of warmth build up inside him. Harry Potter is still alive, and Yaxley lied for Percy, Horcrux be damned).

Tom stirs from beside Percy, his instincts perhaps tingling, or his impatience to defeat the Dark Lord winning over his caution, and Percy moves without thinking, taking a tiny step to his left so that his body brushes firmly against Tom. *Wait*, he says silently in his head, his hand slithering out to catch Tom's, and his luck seems to hold because Tom listens to him and does not move. Tom's skin is cool beneath Percy's touch, and strangely soft, and Percy finds his fingers tightening on Tom's despite himself.

For three long heartbeats nothing happens. Voldemort laughs, and though nobody joins in, it seems not to matter. For three long heartbeats nothing in the world exists except for Voldemort's laugh.

Then Harry pushes himself to his feet, and his wand is in his hand, and Voldemort's laugh freezes in his throat.

"Good attempt, Tom," Harry says coolly, his eyes so dark they are nearly black. "Want to try again, or have you had enough?"

Voldemort's magic rolls out, as does Tom's, and for a second Percy cannot breathe under the dual onslaught of shock and surprise and hatred. And then—

"*Avada Kedavra*," Voldemort bellows at the same time that Harry cries, "Expelliarmus!" and with a brilliant flash of green and red and golden light, Voldemort's curse rebounds on him and the Dark Lord falls back, dead.

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Before the shocked gasps can even leave everyone's throats, before Ginny's sobs can turn into laughter, before anything can happen, Tom takes four steps forward and knocks Harry to the ground with a savage blow. Ron's indignant yelp rings out into the silence—for a second later, Tom's magic comes soaring forward, erecting a shimmering circle of magic around he and Harry, blocking everyone out to stand uselessly outside in their surprise.

"Stop," Percy yells, as every wizard pulls out their wand. "Stop, all of you."

"Is He—is He gone?" Yaxley gasps, his eyes searching for Percy. Rookwood is silent, but his hand is nearly white as bone around his dark, stubby wand. He's seconds away from attacking or disappearing, Percy can tell.

"He is," Percy says, "but not Tom."

He would say something else, but he feels his arm burning, and with a cry of pain he drops to his knees, unable to focus on anything other than his skin sizzling into a red-hot brand. He feels Tom's magic calling him, sweeping through the Mark. Yaxley and Rookwood mirror him, and Severus too, the four of them brought to the knees as Tom's magic pulses furiously through their bodies.

Ginny comes to his side, but he pushes her away roughly with a jerk of his hand. It is all he can do to focus, to focus on the familiar feel of Tom's magic, to measure himself against it and pull himself slowly forward. Four steps separate him from Tom's barrier, and those four steps take nearly everything out of him.

"Please," he whispers into the world, his vision darkening, Tom's rage so overpowering that he cannot smell the forest, nor hear everyone's cries, nor feel the grass beneath his knees, nor taste the blood filling his mouth from where he'd bitten his lip roughly. "*Let me in."*

Tom's magic washes around him as he inches closer to the barrier, shimmering in a strange, opaque sort of way, like a distorted mirror, or the underside of the Philosopher's Stone. Vaguely, Percy is aware of hands grabbing at him, of the familiar feel of Severus' magic, but with a burst of strength he pulls at the barrier with his magic until it recognises him. With a surge of energy, he pushes himself forward, falling through the barrier.

"How is he alive?" Tom demands, his voice nearly a howl. Percy blinks up at him in confusion. Outside the magical barrier, the figures move around in strange, alien patterns. He is struck by the oddity of it; he can feel their magic, hear their muffled voices, but they may as well be in another room. A second later, he gasps in pain; Tom has struck him across the mouth, sending him sprawling into the damp grass. "Percy, *how is he alive?*"

"I don't know," chokes Percy. His lip smarts; he raises a hand to it and looks at his fingers in bemusement, the red glaze of blood on his two longest fingers an oddity his jumbled brain cannot immediately explain. Had Tom—*hit* him, like a common Muggle?

Percy screams a second later as the Cruciatus rolls over him like a dark, cold wave, hammering small pieces of ice into his skin and tearing strips of flesh off of his bones. Tom's Cruciatus is so incredibly cold. It is so jarringly intimate to feel Tom's magic tear into his skin savagely that Percy has the odd desire to laugh, even as his throat convulses in pain.

"*What do you know?*" Tom roars, ending the curse, and for the first time, Percy sees the Dark Lord in Tom, rather than noticing Tom in the Dark Lord. It chills him and it steadies him, and he takes an extra heartbeat to gasp out his fear on the grass, trying to gather his breath before answering.

He looks up slowly and he sees Harry floating in front of him, his mouth open in a soundless scream, his body jolting and flailing against whatever spell Tom is using to torture him. Percy's mind feels sluggish and slow, and he struggles to focus as Tom whirls on him, his face a mask of rage.

"Maybe…the prophecy…" Percy gasps out, feeling his body begin to howl with pain as sensation returns after the Cruciatus. He does not try to push himself to his feet yet; he is intimately aware of how to recover after the curse. "Power…you…know not."

"There is no power I do not know!" Tom screams, and Harry's body jerks violently, convulsing wildly. A second later Harry cries out, as Tom removes the silencing spell he must have cast, and Percy cowers into himself at the sound of Harry's screams. Tom turns on Harry in a fury. "*Tell me how you survived!*"

Harry laughs, his voice raw, even as he hangs there by the strength of Tom's magic in the centre of the strange domed barrier of Tom's magic, Hogwarts a remote shadow in another world. "You will never understand," he whispers. "What it's like to have something worth dying for."

Percy shivers, both at the calm understanding in Harry's eyes, this boy that has died twice for them, and the building storm of rage in Tom's. "*What magic do you know?* I order you to tell me!"

Harry screams again, a piercing scream that fills the whole room, and Percy presses his body to the grass, fingers scrabbling for purchase in the dirt, weeping silently. Oh, Merlin, what is he going to do?

"Love," gasps out Harry when he can speak again, blood running freely from his scar. "I know love. I wish you did too, Tom, but you'll never know love. You'll never understand what it is like to love another soul."

"Love," spits out Tom in disgust, turning away from Harry. Percy freezes despite himself as their gazes meet. "Love. I have no need for love."

Tom falls silent, staring at the ground as his gaze turns inward, his arms crossed tightly to contain the anger that still clearly threatens to spill from him. Percy stays extremely still. He isn't stupid enough to think that Tom has forgotten about him, but he doesn't want to attract Tom's attention until he has to.

His mind is aching, his shields nearly torn to pieces by the pain of breaching Tom's shields and then surviving his torture, but Percy forces his thoughts to begin limping painfully along the lines of logic. So Harry has survived. It may be like the diadem attacking the diary, like Percy had once suspected; perhaps no version of Tom can kill Harry. Or perhaps Harry *is* the Master of Death, and is truly immortal. Or maybe love, whatever that means, saved Harry

again like Lily's love once kept him alive. Maybe the Horcrux is still there, or it's finally been removed.

But Voldemort died. That, at least, constitutes the day a victory—or will constitute a victory, if they can survive the next few hours. If Percy can contain Tom, maybe even defeat Tom, who looks in his rage ready to burn the entire castle to the ground.

I have no need for love.

Tom's form is so familiar to him. Percy's attention is caught by it, even as Tom turns again on Harry, demanding that Harry reveal the secret of his survival. He knows Tom's body—intimately, in a way, though of course they have so rarely touched, and Percy would still blush today to think of them even holding hands. Without the taint of the Dark Lord's magic nearby, Percy can feel Tom's magic, clean and cold and so achingly familiar, that his own magic is already anchoring himself against it in tired relief.

But Tom's face is twisted into a cruel snarl of rage. But Tom had struck him down with his own hand, and tortured him, and is torturing Harry now. But Tom will soon think to call on Hogwarts' magic, if he hasn't already attempted that, to aid him in his fruitless effort to shield himself from future harm.

Percy thinks of Tom, eleven years old, so desperate for Dumbledore's approval. Oh, Tom. He does not even begin to realise how damaged he still is, how vulnerable he still can be, how hurt he remains, despite it all.

Can you kill him, when it really comes down to it? You might falter, Percy imagines Myrtle asking him, hovering in front of him. He imagines Severus, scowling down at him; his mother, shaking his arm. *Stop dithering and do it!* McGonagall, raising an expectant eyebrow as he struggles yet again to transform into a lynx. *Take a leap of faith.* The Dementor, ageless in a way that Percy cannot begin to fully understand. *You cannot win a battle of magic, but of souls.*

Tom, brushing lips tenderly over Percy, his magic purring over Percy's body. *You have sheltered my soul in yours.*

And yet—*I have no need for love.*

Tom hums to himself and Percy tenses, recognizing the sound. Tom has thought of something. Indeed, when Percy looks up, Tom is staring at him with an evaluative glint of his eyes.

"Come," Tom orders, and for one wild second Percy considers whipping out his wand and murdering Tom, but he can't bring himself to do it. So he steps forward obediently and controls his flinch when Tom grabs his left arm.

The Mark on his arm is raised and raw, more red than black ink, and when Tom presses a finger to it, Percy's entire body explodes in flames.

“I have you,” says Tom, “And all of them, they are all linked to me. I have your souls; I have no need of love when I have *power*.”

The Cruciatus has introduced Percy to many forms of mental torture; torture that feels like nails, like hammers, like knives, torture that feels like flayed skin and bleeding wounds, torture that feels like each of his fingers is individually breaking. But what Percy feels now is something less tangible and yet infinitely more painful. He sees a golden glow at the corners of his eyes and feels faintly like he may be fainting, but then he sees his arm glow translucent and his stomach convulses in horror.

“Tom…” Percy cries out, his voice nothing more than a rasp, but Tom ignores him, intent on stripping Percy’s magic from him, and the magic of all of the Death Eaters around the world.

(Though Percy does not know it, dozens of men drop to their knees, glowing golden, and their friends and enemies alike stare at them in shock as their bodies turn translucent, golden strands of magic weaving through their bodies).

“Tom, you promised me,” Percy manages to say through the pain, each word a torment.

“Oh, shut up,” says Tom dismissively, his face screwed into an expression of concentration.

“I thought…you cared for me,” Percy pants out, anything to try and distract Tom, anything to stop his magic from gathering in his body and pouring out of him in a perfidious stream.

He feels himself weakening, feels his magic growing tired, the golden streams inside him slowing to desultory drips, feels his grasp on the world loosening. He’s so tired, and he wants to sleep...

Tom laughs sharply, and the sound is more cutting than a knife. “Oh, Percy,” he says, squeezing Percy’s arm harder so Percy nearly faints at the pain. “I have cared for you. But if you care for me, you will understand why I must do this. You have turned down immortality at my side twice; you were always going to die, and so you may rest knowing your death has brought up on the future that we planned for.”

He *was* always going to die. Hadn’t he told Tom that very same thing? Hadn’t he said his goodbyes, knowing that they would be final?

"I thought…you needed me…"

As the pain continues to wash over Percy, as his magic howls as it tears through his body, Percy feels dizzyingly that he can see the magic as it ebbs out of him, in a clear golden stream. He can see the magic around him too, Tom's magic like the roar of a frozen river, Harry's magic, the magic in the air, waiting to be transformed into being. He sees this magic and realises suddenly that he is within it and separate from it, that as he feels this part of him rip away from him, he becomes aware that there is another part of him that can formulate his thoughts as they race through his mind, and a third part of him that contains his beating heart and the great trees of Hogwarts and everything he's ever known and loved.

Slowly, deliberately, Percy measures himself against the pain. Slowly, deliberately, he detaches himself from his magic and reaches into his pocket, where his fingers close around a small grey stone.

Die with grace, says Scrimgeour, says Severus, says Percy to himself before he sleeps. He will die, but he's not dead yet.

"Part of me...loved you," says Percy, honestly. His mind feels slow. After everything—after eleven years of studying soul magic in a body that was not quite his—he still does not know enough about magic, still does not know how to stop Tom from harvesting the magic of the Death Eaters, still does not know whether Tom even can build himself a new soul, or draw upon the great magics of Hogwarts.

But he knows Tom, and at the end of it all, he knows himself, too.

Tom hesitates, just for a second, his fingers stilling on Percy's forearm, the gesture suddenly intimate, as if a cruel, twisted imitation of a lover's caress. Percy knows before Tom asks that he will ask the next question, will not be able to let a comment like that go unaddressed. "What do you mean?"

"We could have been partners," continues Percy, slowly, his voice barely audible. "You're the greatest wizard of your time, Tom. Sometimes I can hardly imagine what you could have accomplished."

"What I *will* accomplish," Tom insists, the edge in his voice betraying how Percy's words are bothering him.

Percy shakes his head slowly. "If you had just been a man," he says honestly. "Oh, Merlin, Tom, do you realise the type of man you could have been? Dumbledore, Grindelwald, even Flamel—they barely hold a candle to the man you could have been."

Tom digs his nails into Percy's skin, but Percy controls the flinch and keeps talking. He's found a way to anchor himself against the pain of his magic ebbing slowly away. The pain still roars in his mind, but he allows it to pass through, acknowledged but not opposed. *I am more than you*, he tells his magic softly and wrenches his mind away from the agony.

"But being a man was never enough," he says softly. "I pity you, Tom. I wish I could have made it right for you, but I wasn't able to, and even if you kill us all, you'll never be more than you are: only a piece of a dead man's soul, forever searching for the rest of you. They're all gone, Tom. All the other Horcruxes are gone, and nothing you do will ever bring them back."

"You do not know what I am capable of," hisses Tom, his eyes flashing red. "You know the theory, Percy. Magic can neither be created nor destroyed. My soul is out there and I can call it back to me."

Percy laughs weakly. "Magic," he concedes. "But not souls. Souls are something else entirely."

"*Everything is magic,"* Tom cries out, "Everything is magic, and magic is *nothing* but power and will."

Percy gives the barest hint of a shrug. "You're…wrong," he says, gasping around a surge of pain as Tom pulls harder on his magic, and the magic of the Dark Lord's followers. "Souls… aren't magic. And you'll never get yours back."

"You know nothing of souls, Percy," hisses Tom spitefully. "You know nothing of magic, and nothing of power. When you die, you shan't leave a single ripple in this world. You understand that, don't you?"

"I know more about souls than you, Tom." Percy spares a glance at Harry, who hangs unmovingly in the air, watching in silence. Their eyes meet, and Percy thinks implausibly of his mother, of Myrtle, of Severus, of everyone who had given him the strength not to die until the proper time. There is one thing left to do before Percy will give his soul up to the Dementors and be at rest. But will he have the strength for it? "I know about souls because I know about regret, and love, and everything in between."

"You know *nothing*—" Tom snarls, and Percy steels himself, searches for the familiar feeling of his own soul and the familiar resonance of Tom's soul against his, and pulls them both into his soul without a glimmer of hesitation.

Except he misjudges, and for an extended second, they dip into the sliver of soul that Tom has left, and Percy finds to his surprise and horror that it is not Hogwarts, not like the soul that Tom designed for himself when he had the power to do so. Tom's soul is a cold snowy day, and they are in a graveyard, and Tom is very young, staring blankly at a tombstone, in a threadbare jacket and wearing only socks. The sky is oppressively dark, too dark for a normal sky, and there is a large rift in it, like a galaxy, or a tear in a blanket, and millions of stars seem to be rushing toward it as streaks in the sky. The snow is cold and biting, and Percy flinches from the impact as snowflakes land viciously on his skin, and all around him the wind howls in an eerie echo of that horrid, monotone chanting from the wild elemental caves.

Tom's soul is *lonely.* It is so incredibly lonely that Percy finds that he is crying silently. It is lonely and it is torn and it is *broken*, and Percy senses instinctively that Tom's soul is *angry*, angry at himself, for it was nothing more than Tom's own ambition that tore a rent in the sky and allowed the essence of his being to trickle out in an endless stream.

"Oh, Tom," Percy says sadly. "I am so sorry."

The small Tom looks up and glares at Percy with such fervour that Percy takes a step back. "Go away."

"Tom—"

"*Go away!"* Tom screams, and with a lurch they too are pulled toward the rift in the sky, sliding out of Tom's soul. Percy reaches again for the feeling of home, of the central tenants of his being, of the part of him that is always him, regardless of his form, and this time they land in his own soul, and all is suddenly quiet.

They are, oddly, in Myrtle's bathroom, or rather right outside, the hallway lit with the slanted, golden afternoon light, still and silent like a large, empty cathedral. The silence is like a balm for Percy, who pants nervously, collecting his breath.

"What is this magic?" Tom says nervously. He's back to his proper age. As Percy's breath returns to him, Percy becomes aware that he can still feel the sharp sting of his magic draining away from him, and the tempting exhaustion of oblivion. *Not yet*, he tells himself firmly, and forces his attention back to Tom, who looks frightened. "What have you done?"

"Part of your soul lived here," Percy says quietly, "or at least visited. I kept him safe, though I did not always know what I was doing." He hesitates. "Did you see where we just were?"

"An illusion—"

"Tom, you've hurt yourself nearly beyond repair," Percy says pleadingly. "You cannot go on like this. Your soul, Tom, it's nearly destroyed."

"You *dare* say such a thing—"

"It is the *truth,* Tom!" Percy thunders, surprising them both into silence. In a quieter voice, he continues. "Please, Tom. Promise me that you will try and heal your soul. It's your only chance. I'll help—I'll, I'll stay by your side, as long as it takes."

Tom, to Percy's surprise, does not turn angrily on him, nor try to curse him, nor fly on him in a violent rage. Instead he stands very still, a lost expression on his face, and asks, an echo of the question he'd asked this morning, "Why?"

And this time Percy can answer it. He can feel his body weakening; they do not have very much time left. What advantage is there to be gained by continuing to lie to himself, to Tom? "Because I loved you," he says simply. "I loved you even though you were always using me for your own gains. Merlin help me, but I did."

"Percy," Tom tries to say tenderly, moving toward him. In here, there is no intoxicating spike of Tom's magic, and Percy feels strangely like he sees everything clearly. "Percy, I do care for you deeply—"

Percy shakes his head. "You don't believe me, do you? You saw your own soul *dying,* and you don't believe me."

"It's *magic,"* Tom insists, his harsh words belying the tender air he had been striving for just seconds earlier. "Power. There is no power I do not know, Percy. You are being weak when I need you to be strong. I do not need to be *fixed*, Percy. I have done nothing wrong."

"Souls are weak," Percy says, sadly, a resigned feeling of understanding beginning to swell by his feet, as if he were Myrtle, causing the water on the floor to pool. "They change form so easily; they split, so perhaps they grow too. There's much I still don't know, much I'll never know."

"Percy—"

"Why is it that we can bring magic from the universe into our own bodies, with nothing more than our own will?" Percy shakes his head, feeling an incredulous laugh bubble up inside him. He feels again like he is drowning, yet he can see so clearly through the shimmering waves. "Why can we do that, but we cannot change the parameters of our own soul? Why is that I can walk through my soul, yet if I move my hand through the air, I can feel yours all around us? Why is that, Tom? Why are we linked like this?"

"Percy, you have to trust me—"

But something has caught Percy's interest, on the wall behind Tom. *Their bodies will lie in the Chamber forever*, written in dripping red ink. Not hers. Theirs. "You were going to kill me," he realises suddenly. Perhaps he had always known. "You were going to use me to bring yourself back to life."

"No—"

"You would have needed more magic than a first or second year, even four of them," Percy thinks out loud. Something had been odd about the whole affair even then, but he hadn't listened as his instincts clanged at him. "You would have needed my magic, magic you recognised, magic you had helped to hone. You lied to me, Tom."

"You lied to *me*," Tom snaps back, bristling. "You just said my Horcruxes were destroyed, but you said you took a vow not to harm them."

"Oh, Tom," Percy says, turning pitying eyes on Tom, who suddenly looks so much smaller here, so much more real. "I have *always* told you the truth."

He walks by Tom and into Myrtle's bathroom, which looks so familiar to him that it burns, a little. Tom joins him, and they stand silently together, staring at the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, where so much had started for them, where so much could have been different.

Will you be able to do what needs to be done, when it comes down to it?

"I meant what I said, earlier," Percy says quietly. When he turns to look at Tom, he sees to his utmost surprise that Tom looks frightened of him, and that it almost looks like his eyes are glimmering with the beginnings of tears. It must be another tactic, an attempt to elicit sympathy from Percy, and Percy steels his heart against it. "I wish that your own life had been enough for you. I wish I had been enough for you. I tried, Tom. I tried *so hard* to be enough for you."

"Maybe you are," says Tom desperately, perhaps guessing at Percy's intentions. "Perhaps you can be. I'll keep you alive—you'll be by my side—"

"You are an incomplete soul," Percy says sadly. He catches Tom's gaze and holds it, knowing it is for the last time. It feels like water is lapping at his head, now, nearly covering him entirely. "Do you regret it, Tom? Knowing what you do now? Knowing what we could have shared, had you been content with a mortal life?"

"I—" Tom stares back at him with wide, hungry eyes, and Percy reads the truth in them as easily as everything else he's learned to read about Tom.

"I'm sorry," Percy says, and he takes a step forward so that they are very close, and this time it is he who leans forward, he who presses his lips against Tom, he who breathes in the familiar glacial scent of Tom's magic, he who feels the heavy buzzing of their souls melding together, he who feels the sharp pang of agony as he tries to make their lives fit together in a way they will never be able to, not these versions of them, not here, not like this, not when they are two planets on their own separate trajectories, destined to intersect for one fleeting second before continuing, alone, for the rest of eternity.

When he steps back, the expression on Tom's face wrenches at something in Percy's chest, but it is also very familiar, even though Percy could never have imagined it from Tom. Percy looks at the way that light slants through the glass windows. *Matching bathrooms, Percy*, says Myrtle. *Your mind is remarkable*, says McGonagall. *You and I understand what it means to have a duty*, he tells Severus, who prepares for him a bowl steaming with unsaid cares. *We will do what must be done.*

A candle appears between Tom and Percy—a long stemmed white candle like the ones that floated above their head at every evening feast—and both of their eyes are drawn to it, and what it represents. It thrums with Percy's soul, with his magic, and with a final effort Percy reaches for the familiar vibration of Tom's soul and wraps its energy around the slender white wax.

It's just like blowing out a candle.

"Thank you," says Percy, and he finds to his surprise that he can smile. "You've changed my life, and I thank you for it."

"Percy—"

Percy drinks in the sight of Tom for the last time, thinking of all the versions of Tom that he has known—laughing Tom, cursing Tom, pacing Tom, Tom with vulnerability real or pretend, Tom with anger and happiness and hope and disappointment, Tom in all his vivid moods, more real and piercing than anyone else Percy has ever known—and mourning each in turn. It all could have been different. Perhaps in a third life, he would have been able to live with grace, rather than merely dying with it, but he supposes he'll never know. He only has these seconds, these last seconds of his life. *There's power in a dying wish, you know.*

"Goodbye, Tom," Percy says, and leaning forward, he blows out the candle and wishes with all his heart, and with Tom's anguished scream echoing in his ears, the world goes dark.

Chapter End Notes

We're not....quite done. Stay tuned.

INTERLUDE

Chapter Notes

Don't worry. Though this chapter says "Book Three", we don't have too much to go. About two chapters remaining, depending on how I edit them. Also, someone pointed out in a review that I should maybe add to my tags so interested parties can find the story. Any suggestions? I don't want to tag it as Percy/Tom or anything that would ruin any of the surprises, so I left my tags very minimal, but definitely open to ideas here.

Thank you to everyone who left their thoughts on the last chapter!! Such a relief to get it out into the universe. Man.

TW for this chapter: thoughts of suicide, depression, an oblique reference to self harm.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

BOOK THREE: UNDECIDED
(ELSEWHERE)

CHAPTER TWELVE: INTERLUDE

March 1998

Severus is surprised to find himself alive, the next morning, when he wakes in the manner of his youth: abruptly and completely, in an unfamiliar location, without any memory of the precise chain of events that led him here, save only a faint sense of shame.

Without moving, he immediately takes stock of the situation, noting that his body is not injured but his magic is critically exhausted, that he is lying sideways on a hard metal bench, and that there are bars running perpendicularly against his field of vision, suggesting that perhaps he has been jailed. Azkaban, or a Muggle cell? His muscles ache from exhaustion, but he does not feel any of the sharp pain that he would expect had he, as he had a few times before, imbibed too much and challenged someone to a physical contest of strength.

But of course, he is no longer twenty. His crimes would be far more serious than a drunken bout at the pub.

With a quiet grunt, Severus swings himself to sit upright on the bench. He pays for his haste with the unpleasant onset of a heavy, throbbing headache that begins behind his ears and spreads mercilessly to afflict his eyes and temples. However, Severus is practised at the art of removing his awareness from physical pain, and so with only minimal effort he turns his attention back toward the mystery of his location. Slowly, his body provides him an

additional clue: there is magic around him, old magic, magic that his body unfortunately recognises.

In the cell opposite, he sees Narcissa Malfoy, looking undeniably lovely, though tired and gaunt. She smiles thinly at him when she notices his attention. Azkaban, then, though Severus is surprised not to feel the all-encompassing misery and despair that he remembers from the conclusion of the first war, when Albus had allowed him pointedly to languish in Azkaban for over a week before rescuing him with his testimony. In retrospect, perhaps Severus should have taken better heed of that warning.

"Good morning, Severus," says Narcissa politely, though not without a heavy dose of irony. Severus has known Narcissa almost his entire adult life, and he can tell at a glance that she is not frightened of her current position, which only adds to the oddity of the situation.

The last thing that Severus remembers clearly is the Dark Lord dying at last, and the sharp pain of relief, followed by Tom, Potter, and Percy disappearing behind the sharp curtain of Tom’s magic. Only minutes later the pain had set in, an awful, consuming pain, pain unlike any torture Severus had felt before. It had burned so hotly through his body that he'd suspected dizzily that he may be ensconced in flames, though the greater anguish had been the feeling of his magic separating itself laboriously from his body, as if someone were pulling away his skin by force and leaving him to be a bloodied mass of muscle instead, as if someone were violating the most intimate part of him, removing his power for their own will…

"The Dark Lord is dead, in case you were wondering," Narcissa interrupts him. She is sitting on her metal bench as well, but infinitely more gracefully than he, her legs crossed and her back straight as if she were expecting a visitor for tea. "My darling niece was quick to organise the capture of all of the Death Eaters, many of whom proved to be suspiciously easy to subdue, given they were all crippled simultaneously by their dear Lord."

Severus does not give her the pleasure of seeing him grimace, though he does indulge in a raised eyebrow. "I suppose I didn't receive an invite to your Marking," he drawls. "Please accept my belated congratulations."

Lucius—where was Lucius?

Almost the instant he casts his mind back for an answer, he receives one, in the form of an unpleasantly vivid memory separating itself from the thick castle walls of his mental protections and falling with a heavy thud to the ground. Lucius, dead on the floor, his blood dripping slowly onto the stones, the sudden silence shocking after an eternity of Lucius' hoarse, desperate screams. Severus had been grateful that Percy had been allowed to leave before witnessing this depravity, even as he wondered whether Voldemort had intentionally prevented Percy from witnessing Lucius' death. Certainly Voldemort had shielded Percy from several of his more...unsavory acts. Severus thinks back to the last Samhain and is once again relieved that Percy had been quietly brewing instead.

Severus cannot fully mask a shudder as he turns back to Narcissa. It had been to Severus' benefit that Lucius had been so undeniably desperate; the Dark Lord had tired of torturing him more quickly than Severus would have expected, and he'd dismissed everything Lucius

had revealed—including that Severus and Percy had known about the Elder Wand—as ravings of a man at the brink of madness.

Severus had suspected for quite some time now that the Dark Lord had lost his renowned ability for powerful Legilimency. There had been a time when even thinking a dangerous thought in his proximity would be enough to have a man killed, and certainly Severus had cautioned Percy to guard his thoughts thusly. That mental battle with the Potter boy in the Ministry may have caused irreparable damage…

"Severus," says Narcissa. Severus blinks and stiffens back into awareness. His mind feels loose and untethered, focusing on minutiae and speculation rather than the important considerations at hand. Azkaban. The Dark Lord. Percy.

"My apologies, Narcissa," he apologies as smoothly as he can. "My mind was elsewhere. You were saying?"

Andromeda Tonks had sent Narcissa a letter, telling her to stay put, not cause any trouble, and wait patiently for her release. She had told her sister once that she would not spend a single night in Azkaban, and Severus would not put it past Andromeda to keep her word, even if Narcissa would not remember that promise. Given that Severus had received no such letter, he takes that to mean that either Andromeda is not convinced he should be freed, is not capable of producing satisfactory evidence, or is leaving the task to Percy, who, now that Severus thinks about it, is likely a cell over. Despite having overseen the boy's Marking, not to mention guarded him through numerous encounters with the Dark Lord, Severus has a difficult time thinking of Percy Weasley as a Death Eater and often lumps him in his head with the Order. Percy is so frustratingly *honourable*, so arrogantly convinced in his own noble missions, that to equate him with any of the supercilious, seedy Death Eaters that are his peers seems—incorrect.

"The Weasley boy, is he here?" Severus asks with studied casualness. Without confirmation that Percy defeated Tom, Severus has to assume otherwise.

Narcissa frowns and shakes her head. "No," she says, her gaze flicking down the row of cells. Severus is still feeling too weary to stand and take a look himself, so he takes her at his word. "I've not heard he is here. Andy didn't say anything about him."

The day passes without either of them receiving answers. After they tire of each other's company—it had always been Lucius that had bound them, and with his death and Severus' silent complicity in it, that weak tie soon snaps—they both sit in silence, averting their eyes when they accidentally make contact. Severus can only see two or three cells down on either side, and they are all standard players—Avery, Nott, Travers, Yaxley—so he says nothing aside from murmuring a curt greeting.

Severus spends most of the day repairing his mental shields and attempting to encourage his magical core to strengthen. As the hours pass, he begins to feel a deep unease build in his lower stomach. He had seen the Potter boy die, and he had seen him come back to life and kill the Dark Lord. He'd seen Tom strike Potter and watched helplessly as Percy crawled after them. Presumably Potter is still alive; Severus would have heard otherwise. They all would have, if the Boy Who Lived had finally died.

Surely Potter's continued life implies the same for Percy? If Tom had overpowered Percy, he would have killed Potter thereafter. In fact, Severus cannot think of a single scenario where Tom would allow Potter to live, which would indicate to him that Tom is dead. But had Tom been defeated at the price of Percy's life?

Yet it was not like Percy to leave Severus here without word. Perhaps Percy had spent the day being hailed as a hero by his ungrateful little family; if he'd been cast as a villain, he'd be in Azkaban with the rest of them. Severus knows that despite Percy's carefully dismissive demeanour when he speaks of his family, he cares strongly for them. Even the Dark Lord—not to mention Tom—had sought to exploit that, or at the very least sought to test the limits of Percy's loyalty. Who had promised to ensure Percy not spend a night in Azkaban? Certainly nobody that cared about Severus. It was not unreasonable to assume that Percy had forgotten about Severus, or de-prioritised him, once his family welcomed him back with open arms.

Something about this twists inside Severus' stomach, and he turns instinctively to hide his face from Narcissa, pretending to measure the distance between the wall and the metal cot. Severus is used to being very low on anyone's mental priority list, but for some reason he'd thought he'd be higher on Percy's.

Their use for each other had always been predicated on the clear and present risk of the Dark Lord, and then later of Tom. Severus would not blame Percy for wishing to rid himself of their association.

Still, it rankles, and most unforgivably, it surprises him that Percy would act in such a way.

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Three days pass without any change, though on the third day he hears the news from Yaxley that he and Percy had felt Potter's heartbeat beneath their fingers and lied defiantly to the Dark Lord. Yaxley admits to the deception half-proudly, half-guiltily. He will need something to get him out of captivity, and this will almost certainly be sufficient, but the Dark Lord had risen from apparent death once before, and Yaxley would be stupid to trumpet his perfidy too loudly in case it happened once more.

"Calm yourself, Corbin," Severus snaps, tiring of Yaxley's twitchy, half-baked defiance and the poisonous scowl it elicits from Nott. "I think it quite unlikely the Dark Lord shall rise again. What of Weasley?"

Yaxley's fidgeting stills, and he shakes his head incredulously. "He knew," the man says hoarsely. "He knew that Potter would be alive. He told me to—wait, to stay silent."

Severus thinks back to that eternal moment when Yaxley and Percy had huddled over Potter's body, searching for a pulse. How had Percy managed to communicate to Yaxley the need for silence in such a precarious position? A quick Imperius, perhaps? Percy had become

reasonably proficient with the spell after a year of controlling the Minister, but the Dark Lord would have sensed a curse, even if Percy had cast it silently. *Severus* would have sensed it, and he had sensed nothing, the only sound his heartbeat thudding in his ears, and the quiet rustling of Percy's robes as he bent over Potter.

"What happened to him? Weasley, that is, not the Potter boy."

Yaxley does not know, and neither do the rest of them, though they discuss Percy for much of the day and conclude that he must have been some sort of spy for the Order. Yaxley does not seem to resent Percy, which is even stranger to Severus, given that Percy and Yaxley had worked so closely together for over a year and Percy had essentially betrayed him. Yaxley had been a high ranking member of the Inner Circle, too; Severus finds it very strange that he is taking the news of Percy's deception so easily. By the end of the evening, Yaxley has decided that he'd known all along, and that he'd even helped Percy, lying to the Dark Lord on *numerous occasions* (this, Severus doubts), and all but planning a mutiny himself. Severus rolls his eyes and tunes them out, beginning to feel the first prickles of worry.

The worry coalesces into a brick of anxiety later that afternoon, when Andromeda returns for Narcissa. "There'll be the first trial tomorrow," she says, avoiding Severus' eyes. "Scrimgeour was alive, apparently—he's been sworn in as temporary Minister. Your block is slated first, and you'll be going alphabetically, by last name."

"Will we have representation?" Nott asks indignantly. "My solicitor—"

Andromeda shakes her head. "Not that I know of. I'm not in charge of the proceedings, but I volunteered to pass the news on to you all."

If Severus wanted to aid Nott, he'd explain that there hadn't been any representation in the first set of trials, nearly twenty years prior, so they all better ready themselves for a series of prolonged legal battles. The Wizengamot had decided once that anyone who had possessed the agency to swear loyalty to the Dark Lord possessed the agency to defend their actions to the court, and Severus cannot imagine they would have changed their mind.

Andromeda leaves without speaking openly to Severus, and Severus cannot bring himself to ask her about any of their shared secrets. Plainly Percy is dead or has forsaken Severus, and Severus does not wish to have the entire cellblock privy to whichever answer he may receive.

In fact, Severus does not elect for a trial, and he does not ask to attend the others. Day by day, the cell block empties; Narcissa, freed up on her testimony, and Yaxley to the same. Nott returns after an unsuccessful argument that he'd been merely following orders, but Avery manages to claim he'd been planning a mutiny against the Dark Lord after his son had been brutally murdered. Bulstrode receives a sentence of only five years, given he'd not actually killed nor tortured anyone, only contributing money to the cause, and Rookwood somehow manages to claim Imperius yet again. This drama repeats itself in cellblock after cellblock, until the flow of visitors cease and the remaining prisoners settle into some semblance of a routine.

Day by day, Severus becomes convinced that the boy is dead, until nearly a month has passed without any news. He receives only a single letter from Minerva, stating tersely that unless Severus is willing to provide testimony to prove his innocence, there is nothing the rest of them can do, given that Severus intentionally acted in such a way that his motives remained unclear, even to those who knew more of the story than they perhaps ought.

Severus crumples this letter in his first before he can stop himself. His first thought is a familiar angered resignation: Albus clearly did not leave any vials of memory to protect his beleaguered spy, and his portrait must be refusing to speak. Severus cannot say it surprises him. After Percy had come to him with the story of the Elder Wand, Severus had realised quickly that Albus had not intended for Severus to survive the war. Severus had not corrected Percy during his…inspired attempts to distract the Dark Lord, but Severus had always believed that Albus had wanted the Dark Lord to think that Severus had the Wand. The Dark Lord would have killed Severus and believed himself invincible, moving to neutralise Potter soon after.

Albus never would have been able to foresee a situation where the Dark Lord decided to attack the boy of the prophecy without even learning its full text, *knowing* Potter had the Elder Wand. In truth, Severus can hardly believe it himself. Although, Severus muses to himself as the days pass and his cellblock finally falls blissfully silent, Albus never calculated for the addition of a time traveller, let alone *this* particular time traveller.

It surprises Severus how much it pains him to realise that Percival Weasley must be dead. Percy certainly has data to spare that would prove Severus' innocence, and given that Scrimgeour survived, Severus cannot imagine that Percy would still be under suspicion. Thus, Percy's name must be cleared, and the boy dead. Minerva's reluctance to visit Severus in person, Andromeda's guilty and shifty behaviour, even the silence from Yaxley after he was freed—none of them have the courage to relate whatever happened to Percy in those taut final moments. He supposes it is no matter; Severus can use his imagination to fill in the details.

To feel *Tom* pulling on his magic, rather than the Dark Lord, had been at first an unpleasantly alien experience. After decades of service, the Dark Lord’s magic feels familiar to Severus, though still distasteful; the Dark Lord often spoke to him through the Mark, or used it to Summon him personally, rather than sending the lighter burn to the group of Death Eaters in advance of a larger gathering. Tom’s magic had felt—colder to Severus, sharper, and in a strange way, more dangerous. It had taken Severus an unacceptable length of time to control the pain to such an extent that he was able to look up, albeit blurrily, and take stock of his surroundings.

The great silver dome of Tom’s magic had captured all of their attention; Yaxley and Rookwood had gazed at it with the same expression that Severus felt certain would have been on his face, had he not controlled his features with a forceful push. Minerva and the others had fruitlessly tried to breach it, though Severus would have told them not to try, had he been capable of speech. Through the dome it had just been possible to see three figures, one jerking in the air, one crumpled on the ground, and the other dominating them both. Then a shift; the one in the air stilled, and the one on the ground pushed himself to his feet, and

reached out for Tom. Then all three had been still for an eternity, before Tom's magic blazed angrily back up and started pulling directly on Severus' magical core.

Had it been Percy or Potter that had reached for Tom, had said something so insulting that Tom had nearly lost control of his facilities? Had it been Percy or Potter to finally end the torment, whether with a Killing Curse or other spell? It had been Percy that died; had he sacrificed himself for Potter, or had Tom discovered his perfidy and lashed out? How had Potter survived, when Percy had not?

Severus reclines on the cold metal bench, staring listlessly up at the ceiling, where an enchanted window shows the great storm gusting around the prison. Percy Weasley, dead. Severus had thought it a certainty that the younger wizard be the one to survive; both Voldemort and Tom had been—fond of Percy, in their own way. Severus was the one who ought to have died many times over. He'd planned to die, at that. He'd been willing to die, almost ready to die, so that the war would finally be over and Severus freed from his miserable, unrelenting burden.

Severus shakes his head, releasing an incredulous laugh as he thinks of those final moments with Lucius, Percy brazenly bluffing the Dark Lord with nothing more than the truth. The boy had been a reckless, impulsive idiot, but the Dark Lord had responded to his artless machinations and strange code of honour in a way that Severus had never seen before. He had captivated Tom, and Tom had been compromised by him. Severus had seen that early on, and though he had not approved, he had thought that perhaps it would protect Percy and help Percy in his task to learn of the other Horcruxes. It is strangely jarring to think of the Dark Lord being similarly...affected.

Severus can think of very few seminal moments in his life: meeting Lily, the first time he'd seen his mother lash out in anger against his father, his first day of Hogwarts, the day he'd shouted *Mudblood*, his Marking, the one night he and Lucius had been truly intimate, Lily's death, the Dark Lord's first defeat, and confronting seventeen year old Percy Weasley as he defiantly stared at Severus through a face full of tears and told him he was going to kill the Dark Lord, the ashes of the Room of Requirement floating around him, two Horcruxes in hand.

Oh, he'd been such an *idiot.* Every move Percy had made with Tom had been such a clear mistake, and Severus had allowed it. Had he been too engrossed in his own tasks? Had he had too strong faith in Percy, or not placed enough value on his life?

Percy Weasley did not deserve to die a silent, ignoble death at the hands of the Horcrux he'd helped create. He had come to Severus for protection, and Severus had failed him.

Severus stares at the ceiling for the rest of the night, his mind unable to move from that single thought.

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Severus has always had complicated feelings about Albus Dumbledore, but for the past year of his life, the overwhelming feeling had been one of great frustration.

Severus considers the thought and shakes his head. If he is being honest—and, unfortunately, the only person he may be truly honest with is himself, so he is obliged to be honest when he must—he had felt frustrated toward Albus for many years, beginning with Potter's tenure at Hogwarts, and intensifying ever since he caught one of his more interesting students with two of the Dark Lord's Horcruxes and learned that his entire world had changed.

That the arrival of Percy Weasley into his life so significantly changed how Severus felt about Albus is another thing that Severus had relegated to the stack of feelings and memories only worth analysing if the war was over and Severus somehow had survived. Severus is a man of his word, so he spends most of his second month in Azkaban forcing himself to think through the pile of bricks his mind had created to guard these thoughts from harm. Albus had not trusted him, not at the very end, not when his trust would have been the most valuable, and Severus forces himself to realise that something had happened during those last few years for Albus to change his mind on Severus.

Unfortunately, the weightlessness that Severus had imagined would float over him at the conclusion of his heavy burden remains elusive. Perhaps his body is still experiencing residual stress. By now he has received confirmation from Yaxley, in a letter, that the man called *Tom* was dead. By now he has received confirmation that the Horcruxes were destroyed, and the Dark Lord no more, and Lily's son alive.

And yet—he feels untethered and unfocused, finding it difficult to focus on the relentless passing of days, to bend his mind toward the task of repentance. Some of his awareness remains in those burning final moments, when Severus had felt his magic slip away. He'd fought it as hard as he could, but there had been a moment, at the end, where he'd closed his eyes and succumbed, knowing that what awaited him was death, and Lily.

This ought to shame him, and perhaps it does. Severus examines the emotion carefully but he cannot feel anything other than painful revulsion at the memory. To feel his magic forsaking him, to be torn and ripped at the very core of his being…

For years, he'd found Potter's survival to be the driving force behind his motivations. How could he not, when he dreamt more often of Lily's almond-shaped eyes than of anything else?

Recently, something of the force behind that memory seems to have dissipated. The guilt remains, smouldering in his stomach with a familiar ache, but not the urgency, the desperate willingness to sacrifice his life so willingly for Potter. Potter survived, so Severus cautiously posits that his changed attitude is merely a delayed sense of relief that his promise to Lily was fulfilled.

As the days pass, and he mourns the wizard he'd come to know as closely as any other wizard, save perhaps Lucius, or Albus, Severus understands something about himself that makes him take pause. The revelations of the last few years...the opportunity to see in Percy Weasley's head how exactly the war ended, to see precisely where the mistakes were made...somehow, the desire to atone for his multitude of sins by winning the war *right* had taken precedence over his loyalty to Lily.

(“*She’d understand, I think,” says Percy, his eyes distant, the grass crumpled under his robes. Expensive robes, at that; Severus had noticed when the boy had started upgrading the calibre of his belongings after being named the Prewett heir. He’d never understood the urge, himself, but then again he didn’t think even expensive robes would suit him as they suited Percival Weasley. It was one of life’s cruel tricks that this boy would be born to the Weasley family, as full of poverty and blind, stubborn loyalty as they were. Percy wears the trappings of luxury far more elegantly than many pureblood heirs Severus had known.*

Severus tenses, though he does not let it show. They had not been talking about Lily, but the reference is unmistakable. One thing he cannot get used to with Percy is how much the boy knows about him, and how casually he sometimes reveals it. That the entire world heard the story of how Severus Snape failed to love Lily Evans—he is glad that his other self had not been alive to witness the humiliation.

“Understand what, precisely?” Severus snaps out when it becomes apparent Percy is not going to continue without prompting.

Percy starts, as if he’d forgotten that he’d said anything at all. Perhaps he had not meant to say it out loud.

“That after the war, you should just rest,” Percy says quietly, and Severus nods to himself. They had not been speaking of Lily but rather of how Percy was afraid that, if he were to survive this war, he would not make very much of himself after all. Not compared to Tom, is the constant undertone behind Percy's insecurity. Severus wonders if he should be flattered or insulted that Percy thinks that, were Severus to survive, he would have little ambition for anything other than leisure.

“A stunning insight, considering you were barely just born when she died.” Severus cannot help the bitterness in his voice. Sometimes he envies Weasley, the chance to return to his youth and right his wrongs with such ease, such determination, such foresight.

Percy does not rise to the bait. Though Severus can rile him when he likes, the boy has learned a semblance of self-control in the last few years. Sometimes, Severus looks at him and can see the man that he truly is, peeking out from behind his youthful exterior. It boggles the mind, sometimes, that Percy in years lived is barely younger than he. “True,” he says with a half-shrug. “But you loved her, so she must have been good. And she cared for you, so she would want you to be happy.”

*Severus’ expression sours so quickly that he cannot hide it. Something about the way that Percy said that so casually—**you loved her, so she must have been good**—rankles him. “I enjoy many things that are not good,” he says, and it is almost a snarl, the way he curls his tongue around the word **enjoy.***

Weasley, to his surprise, flushes, and looks down. He grabs a bunch of grass and buries his long fingers in it, seemingly unconcerned with the dirt creeping beneath his fingernails. “But you love very little,” he says quietly.)

To rest. It is an interesting point. Severus does not know what that means. He had never thought he would remain alive after the Dark Lord; certainly he and Albus had planned for

his death. What would Percy have done, if he had survived?

Severus does not have the wild, ambitious urge to prove himself like Percy, nor the desire to influence and intimidate others like Albus, nor the willingness to act to accrue power like Lucius, nor Lily's creative drive. When he was young and arrogant, he had been driven by a desire to leave a mark on the world, to be celebrated and recognised for his power, to be feared. Yet as he'd told Percy, once, this drive had brought him none of the rewards he'd sought when he was young and foolish.

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Severus finds that Azkaban agrees with him, to his surprise. Something must have happened with the Dementors during the war, for many of them have fled the Ministry's service and not returned, leaving Azkaban in the hands of a dozen wizarding guards aided by a few remaining Dementors. The food is quite intolerable, but it is warm and served at prompt intervals. His cell is threadbare and uncomfortable, but Severus is practised enough at wandless magic that he is able to improve his conditions to the point where they are adequate.

He finds it pleasing to have his world narrowed to such a small, unchanging space. Severus has indexed his body numerous times and found that the most prevalent feeling gripping his limbs is *exhaustion*. He has been fighting a war for nearly two decades, and fighting his own private battles for a decade more than that, and he is *tired.* Even the idea of being in a Potions lab exhausts him. Everything exhausts him, except for the slow, painful reconstruction of his Occlumency shields, dipping into each of the key memories over the last thirty years and evaluating each. Percy, Lily, Lucius, Regulus—he examines them all carefully, every misstep in school and angry outburst, every decision point where he could have turned his fate to the better.

He supposes that part of him ought to be upset that he does not receive any visitors. He would have thought perhaps Minerva would have come for the obligatory questioning, or even the Minister. None of his old Death Eater compatriots dare to return to Azkaban, not after they'd so narrowly escaped with their lives from his fate. He surmises that there has been no public reveal of his true role, and therefore the public has no reason to believe of him anything other than the truth: he is a murderer and a Death Eater, and he deserves to be forgotten.

(Although—it is not strictly *true* that he does not receive a single visitor. Of the twelve human Azkaban guards, eleven are of Slytherin house, and all are pureblooded young wizards under the age of twenty-five, which means unfortunately that he had taught an even dozen of them. They come, one by one, in nervous spurts, some to merely stare, wide-eyed at him, and others to attempt to curry favour.

What they think *he* can do for them, Severus cannot say, given that if anything they have the power to make his life quite miserable. Yet come they do, and some bring small gifts, or extra

portions of food, and the Bulstrode boy even brings him a book to read, and the youngest of the Avery lot occasionally snuggles in a *Daily Prophet*. It is strange, but perhaps they assume he will be freed one day and remember their furtive attempts).

Whenever Severus grows tired of his solitude, or begins to wonder with impatient curiosity about the world outside his four cell walls, he reminds himself that this was the allotted time for repentance, and he does not deserve anything other than what he has. The war is over; it has taken its last victims; and Severus has implausibly survived. To be bored is the least of the punishments which he deserves.

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June 1998

By the third month, however, Severus has re-lived a lifetime of memories and cannot quite decide on his next move. To *repent*—what is it, precisely, that he must do?

He had tortured himself through hours of exquisitely painful memories: his father striking down his mother, while he cowers behind a door; his first public humiliation in Potions, when he had not known how to use a mortar and pestle, outing him as at least a halfblood if not worse; being rejected from the Slug Club; calling Lily a Mudblood; the sick feeling in his stomach every time he heard Lucius brag to their classmates about meeting the dangerous wizard known only as *Lord Voldemort.* He'd watched his later memories too, watched impassively as his younger self killed a Muggle, killed Lily, killed Dumbledore.

Severus had felt the requisite guilt, lingering in it, apologising in his head with as much specificity as he could wring from his wrongs. He'd written up a plan for his solicitor to donate his meagre wealth to the Muggleborn foundation that Hermione Granger was giving interviews about in the *Prophet*, something he hopes Lily would have approved of, had he been able to tell her about it.

He had contemplated self-flagellation, but try as he might, he could not quite understand who or what would be benefited by his harming himself physically, and anyway after a decade of service to two harsh masters, Severus is capable of detaching his mind from awareness of physical pain whenever it lashed through his body, thereby rendering such punishment useless.

Thus stymied, Severus spends a majority of his third month in Azkaban sitting quietly by, watching as the sun passed through the enchanted window, and wondering if he had exhausted the potential of his life and ought to take the final step toward death.

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It is therefore both welcome and unwelcome to have the guards announce that he has visitors: Andromeda and Narcissa, sweeping through the ward with their characteristic Black presence, ignoring the calls and cries from the other Azkaban inhabitants with ease.

Narcissa is dressed in simple, black mourning robes. Severus cannot imagine it would be easy for her to publicly mourn Lucius; he has not read too many of the papers, but he can easily picture what the *Daily Prophet* would have to say about the Dark Lord's right hand man. Nevertheless, Severus knows that Narcissa and Lucius cared for each other, in their own way. Andromeda is also dressed for mourning, though as far as Severus knows, everyone she cares about survived the war. Solidarity, perhaps.

"You're going to be sentenced to death," Andromeda says, as her opening, earning her an exasperated look by her sister. Severus has experienced both Andromeda's bluntness and Narcissa's lengthy prevarication before, and he finds he prefers the elder Black's directness, though this news, while not unexpected, settles unpleasantly in his stomach.

He wills his limbs to be still. So the decision has been made without his input, which he supposes is a fitting end to his life. "I see."

"Because," Andromeda continues heatedly, "You have elected not to participate in the trials, and Harry Potter has been saying that you were responsible for his parents' deaths, not to mention Albus Dumbledore's."

Harry Potter. Severus had been relieved to hear the boy survived, but he cannot say that he has regretted that the interlude of their lives where he had to be constantly aware of the boy's many doings has finally ended. Perhaps permanently, it seems. "I see."

"It will take nothing short of a miracle to turn the public opinion away from sheer bloodlust," Narcissa interjects, as her sister nearly swells with rage at the inadequacy of Severus' response. He hides a smile; he has such few pleasures left that it still pleases him to know he can affect someone so strongly with such few words. "You must stand trial, Severus, and you must agree to testimony under Veritaserum."

"Am I the only Death Eater to be killed?" Severus motions toward the rows of cells. Many of the Death Eaters escaped sentences, but many line the walls, too stupid or too poor or too arrogant to establish proper defences for their trials. "Or will it be a mass execution?"

"Just you, so far," Andromeda spits at him angrily. "But I suppose you won't provide any evidence on your behalf. You're just like him."

"Andy—"

"—no," Andromeda snaps back. Severus straightens and watches her carefully; there is an edge to her demeanour that he cannot properly place, but then again, he is not particularly familiar with this Black sister. He turns his attention instead to Narcissa, who has intersected with his life in numerous ways over the last twenty years, but he cannot read the truth from her face either. He watches carefully as Narcissa lays her hand on Andromeda's shoulder

before Andromeda shakes it off with an angry gesture. “I’m *tired* of this. All I want to do is go on holiday with my husband and my daughter, but instead, I have to spend my time shepherding these *idiots* into a semblance of a normal life. Merlin, Severus, do you *want* to die? The Dark Lord couldn’t kill you, so you’ll let the Minister?”

Severus contemplates having his private life aired to the public and then gives a small, controlled shrug. There will be no way to prove his innocence to the calibre required by these trials without uncovering the whole sordid story of Lily, not to mention of Percy, and Severus does not feel capable of speaking about either. “In truth, I did not think it likely I would survive the war at all,” he says, considering the idea that he may be set to death. He waits to see if his mind or magic will rebel at the idea, but both are silent. “I do not wish to give testimony.”

“Harry does not want me to speak of the *items* we destroyed,” Andromeda says, a pleading edge of anger in her tone. “You have to talk to him, Severus. I can provide memories to speak to your cooperation in this manner.”

“He is correct to not speak of them. There is much that we would be better off forgetting.” The force of Voldemort’s gaze, for instance, when it had settled on a sixteen-year-old Severus Snape and made him feel *seen*. Severus did not have the same type of relationship to Voldemort as Percy had to Tom—or at least, what he suspected Percy did to Tom—but he too had been Voldemort’s pupil, he too had been asked, once, to swear eternal fealty to the Dark Lord’s soul, he too had escaped his fate only by the Dark Lord’s sudden demise.

Andromeda gives him the type of stubborn look that Severus saw on her daughter’s face numerous times during her seven-year tenure at Hogwarts. Narcissa’s face is more composed, though he is surprised to see an undercurrent of resentment when she levies the force of her pale, lovely eyes on him. “You were involved in Lucius’ death.”

Severus nods shortly. He had provided her with as full of an account as he could spare, in memory of the man that had bound them both together.

“It is not…your fault that you survived, when my husband did not,” says Narcissa with some difficulty. Severus blinks, surprised. “But it would be an insult to his honour to go to such an unnecessary death.”

Severus cannot help but say, though he modulates his tone to be more gentle out of respect, “But what of living an unnecessary life? My life is to do with what I choose, Narcissa. I do not wish to provide testimony. If that mandates my death, then I am reconciled to that option.”

“Read this,” Andromeda says savagely, thrusting a letter into the bars. “My daughter found it addressed to you.”

They leave soon after, though both try in their separate ways to convince him otherwise. Once his cell has returned to its former silence, Severus considers his impending execution more carefully. He had been relieved to survive, in the instinctive way that all animals are to escape death. On the contrary, he cannot say he would not be relieved to die, either. His careful consideration of his thirty-six years of living has left him with the indelible

impression that he has fulfilled his purpose in life, to the best of his ability, and he has nothing more to offer the world.

He cannot teach at Hogwarts, not again, even if he *were* cleared in a trial. It would be too humiliating to return to his previous position as bat in the dungeon, and he cannot imagine that he would be able to hold the respect of any of the students who would return. Severus considers a lifetime of solitude alone in his parents' house, surrounded by Muggles, and shudders to himself. Travelling alone holds no appeal to him, nor pursuing Potions research, nor practising his magic, nor any of the other insipid activities that seem to fill the lives of the masses. What use does he have for acquiring *things*, or decorating his house, or flaunting his wealth? Lucius' manor had been more of a cage than Severus' Muggle shack had ever been.

Lily would be there in death, and Lucius, and his mother, and Regulus, and now Percy too.

The letter that Andromeda passed to him sits in the corner of his cell and the edge of his attention until the evening, when it grows too large for him to ignore any longer. As he'd known it would be, it is from Percy. He contemplates it for nearly an hour, unmoving from his position on the metal bench, ignoring the supper tray that has long gone cold, despite the guard's pitiable attempt at a Ever-Warming Charm. He does not imagine that the younger Tonks would have been able to find the letter concealed in Percy's things, so he has to assume that Percy had given the letter to her prior to his death, which would mean that Percy had known he was going to die. Unless the letter was from earlier, from a time where Percy had felt frightened?

He reaches suddenly for the scroll and unrolls it, his eyes going to the date inked neatly on the upper right-hand corner, as if the scroll were one of the many assignments that Percy had handed to him, addressed in the same way. Percy had written him the letter the night prior to the Final Duel.

Severus tries to think back to how Percy had seemed, those last few hours. He had not *seemed* frightened, at least not to the point where he would write a letter to say his goodbyes. Presumably Percy had been alone, otherwise he wouldn't have found the privacy to write any letter at all, which would imply to Severus that Tom had not appeared to threaten Percy in any particular way. The Dark Lord had not threatened Percy, either; rather, he'd taken pleasure in informing Severus that he intended to take Percy as his sworn companion, a position Severus had denied by carefully never giving his resurrected lord an answer.

In short, Severus can only think of one scenario: Percy had seen how Tom gravitated to him and had planned to die, by his own hand if need be, to give Potter or Severus or Andromeda the edge required to defeat Tom if it became necessary. They had known the likely sequence of events: Potter first, then Voldemort, and then Tom would be unchallenged and victorious. Severus had entertained his own apprehensions about this plan, namely a concern surrounding who would be capable of defeating Tom, but he had agreed with Percy that to push the Dark Lord to attack Harry was the first priority. Severus had been prepared to sacrifice himself in a duel if it came down to that.

And so, it seems, had Percy.

Slowly, the events of the night unfold in front of Severus' eyes, as horrid and unwelcome as any of his nightmares. Tom had been torturing Harry for information, and Percy had pretended to give it to him. Perhaps Percy had even told the truth; Severus knew from experience that Percy was painfully capable of doling out the truth with such exquisite precision that it wounded more than any lie possibly could. He had distracted Tom and then perhaps duelled him, or ingested a potion to kill himself, or pointed his wand to his head and taken his own life. For all of Tom's heartlessness, Severus had seen how Tom jealously observed Percy. He would have been shocked to see his prize cut down, and that moment of inattention would have been just enough for Harry Potter to gasp out a Killing Curse.

You blithering idiot, Severus snaps at Percy in his head, who gives him that irritating rueful half-smile that always preceded some idiotically sentimental comment. Percy had thanked him so many times that Severus had itched to hear yet another *honourable* and *honest* phrase come out of the boy's mouth. In fact—he reads the first few paragraphs in an angered rush, unable to prevent himself from rolling his eyes. The boy had called him a *teacher* and a *friend* and *thanked him* for sharing his burden.

"I killed you," Severus snarls, his fingers tensing around the scroll, though his magic sparks to protect the scroll from harm. "And you're *thanking me*. I always told you to guard yourself more carefully."

Please forgive me for my failings with Tom. I have let you down, and I am ashamed of my weaknesses. I do not know why Tom affected me the way that he did. Perhaps if I had another lifetime to live, I could figure it out. With only a few days left, I can only apologise and hope that you understand.

Severus feels a pulse jump in his jaw as he reads this, a sign of how close he is to losing control. He is about to check himself, to engage in his customary Occlumency exercises to bundle his emotions out of reach, but then he glances around the cell and realises that he is alone in here, and nobody can see him if he indulges in his anger.

(Though he is careful to raise a wandless ward around the perimeter of the cage. He may be willing to let his anger unfurl through the cell, but he will not allow anyone else the freedom to witness it.)

Stronger wizards than Percival Weasley had been *affected* by the Dark Lord. Perhaps Percy did not understand that, only having seen the post-resurrection version of the Dark Lord, a monster out of horror tales. It had only been in the last few months that Severus had begun to see the worrisome signs of the Dark Lord's true self peeking through the crazed, cruel façade.

The Voldemort that had recruited Severus, Lucius, Bellatrix, and a smattering of other strong wizards had been the most intoxicating, charismatic man that any of them had ever met. That Voldemort could read the thoughts out of his followers' heads as if they'd shouted them through cupped hands. That Voldemort's magic was a dozen times stronger than it ever would be again, a truly dizzying rush of power that lifted them and made them feel fiercely strong, as if they were capable of razing the entire world to dust and creating it again from scratch. That Voldemort had been sly and clever and witty, conversant in more topics than Severus had even heard of, academic and intellectual and challenging. He would set Severus to

researching obscure branches of magic, had Severus spend those first months out of Hogwarts leafing carefully through old tomes that he'd swear hadn't been touched for the last three centuries, and then slyly point out an error in Severus' reasoning, even though he'd checked himself infinite times.

He'd cowed Lucius, the undisputed pureblood prince of their time, and seduced the dangerous and incomparable Bellatrix Black; he could match the cruelty and violence of the Lestrange brothers, who even in school had been widely feared; he could whip up any group of dinner guests into a murderous frenzy, just with a few well-placed words. And, what had really astounded them, the arrogant teenagers that they had all been, he controlled their parents too. Severus' mother had told him she was proud of him just twice in his life: once, when he'd received a Hogwarts letter, and once when he'd shown her the Dark Mark on his arm. Abraxas Malfoy sat proudly at Voldemort's right, and the fathers of all of Severus' classmates, men that he'd long feared and cautiously emulated.

And Percy was blind enough to apologise that he'd been compromised by interacting with three incarnations of the Dark Lord's soul, day after day, for nearly *five years?*

Severus would have killed the boy, if by some miracle he had survived and was sitting in front of him.

Promise me one thing, Severus, on the basis of all that we have shared. Your penance is complete; you have saved the world, in a way, and you have brought Lily's son to adulthood the best you could. Do not mourn his part in this play any more than mine. We have both faced our deaths with clear eyes, as Regulus did, and Dumbledore, and Lily as well, and decided that we would face death in the hope of a better future. I know that such words from me may be unwelcome or unexpected, and I do not blame you for your anger when you read them. Yet if I could ask you one thing, it would be that you <u>live</u>, Severus, free of guilt. Do not waste the gifts you have been given, nor the skills you have painfully obtained.

"Faced your deaths with clear eyes," snorts Severus, though his angered tone has lost some of his rancour. "You should have told me your plan."

What gifts Percy must have thought Severus had been given, or skills that were worthy of being exercised in peace—Severus had always known the boy to be an idealist, if not an optimist, but these lines seem nothing more than foolishness. If Percy had *spoken* to Severus about his misguided noble desire to sacrifice himself, Severus would have told him firmly that they would all have been better served if *he* were the one to kill himself. Percy had the misfortune to relive a decade of his life; it would have been the least that Severus could have done to trade his life to provide the boy a chance to live beyond these pre-written years.

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Severus spends the four nights before his scheduled execution writing a brief account of the second life of Percival Ignatius Weasley and his foolishly heroic attempts to end the war. Of

his own participation in such events he adds little, only filling out some of the details, or providing his analysis as to why a given action had been in the context of its time, the correct one. Percy had never known, for instance, that his bold manipulation of Yaxley to end the Muggleborn trials had likely resulted in dozens of lives saved. Severus had not wanted to tell Percy what the Dark Lord had planned for the Muggleborns discovered to be traitors, given that at any time Voldemort could have reignited his interest in experimenting with the Muggles and the boy would have been crushed with guilt that he'd sent them off to Azkaban, rather than ferrying them out of the country.

He includes as many of the details of the time travel ritual as he thinks will be sufficient to underscore the great personal risk that the boy had taken without providing enough clues for a copycat to attempt the same. Percy had all but killed himself, or so Severus concludes, based on nothing more than idealistic hope and a stubborn resolve to right his wrongs.

Severus glosses over the issue of Tom, or at least the issue of how Percy had felt about Tom. Severus had seen often that the boy was—enthralled by the Horcrux, but of course Tom would have done nothing save slyly stoke Percy's interest, perhaps with calculated gestures or words. It would most definitely have remained one-sided, and regardless, Severus does not think it a necessary component of the story, though Percy's influence over both versions of the Dark Lord had been—not insignificant.

Instead, he explains that Percy had lied to the Dark Lord every single day for half a decade, had managed to conceal his furtive activities from a portrait literally hanging on his wall, had manipulated not one but three slices of the same soul to take actions along the vectors that were favourable to them.

At the very end, Weasley knew that his death would provide us with a sufficient distraction for one of us to defeat Tom, who otherwise would have been far too powerful magically and otherwise. He was the only one of us capable of breaching Tom's wards, despite the pull on his magic. We had auxiliary plans ready to defeat Tom in time, if we had not succeeded that afternoon, but Tom could have wreaked unknown havoc on the world in the interim. Weasley's bravery ended the war decisively.

Here Severus pauses, his quill hovering in the air. The guard had provided the scrolls when Severus had asked for them; it was the young Bulstrode, who still squeaked in fear whenever Severus so much glanced at his direction. He'd provided nearly a dozen extra scrolls, but Severus cannot think of anything else to add, except,

Many of us owe our lives to him.

Then he nods decisively, rolls the scrolls together, and traces his fingers down the seam, his magic activating to seal them together. He checks the time; it is nearly morning, barely hours from the time of his execution. Perfectly scheduled.

Severus calls for Bulstrode, who takes the scroll and nervously promises to deliver his final account to Minerva McGonagall the second that his shift ends. Bulstrode hovers near Severus' cell door, even after the parcel has exchanged hands, until Severus is forced to look up and irritably snap, "*What?*"

"I'm sorry," Bulstrode says in a rush. "That you're to be—executed." The boy flushes gracelessly but presses on, "My father told me that you pressured him to send me to my aunt, to be her companion. I hated it at the time, but it kept me away from… *Him*."

Severus raises an eyebrow, both at the hushed, fearful reference of *Him* and at the reminder of what he'd done for the few Slytherin students whose parents listened to him over the Dark Lord. Severus had carefully, firmly bullied as many weak willed fathers as he could to send their sons to relatives, to university, to adventure if they must, and though he'd never even insinuated that to do so would be to save these sons from service, many of the parents had, thankfully, understood.

Some hadn't. Severus had *told* Keravin Avery to send his son away, and Keravin had all but threatened to accuse Severus of treason. The elder Avery son had died within the first six months of the war, killed by Tom to cover his misdeeds.

"You may pay me back by delivering the scroll at the first opportunity," Severus says firmly, and the boy nods eagerly and disappears.

Left to himself for the final time, Severus examines his feelings about this new idea. In truth, he'd all but forgotten that he'd ever risked interfering. When he'd conducted the harsh, grim tally of his wrongdoings, he'd forgotten to weigh in that he had saved a few of the students, perhaps, and managed to distract the Carrows from Ginevra and Neville's rebellious campaign long enough for them to establish a tenuous stronghold on the seventh floor of the castle. These acts do not negate even the most harmless of his crimes, but he finds to his surprise that he is cheered, albeit briefly, at the small counterbalance they provide. Perhaps if he does see Lily in death, he will tell her about them.

Severus is so prepared for his death that it comes to his surprise when the Minister of Magic himself arrives to collect him and brings him, unchained, to the Minister's office. Severus had been expecting the gallows, a public hanging, or at least a public Killing Curse. Materialising back into his body in the Ministry, Severus has to question whether he'd prefer to be privately executed here, or in Azkaban. Perhaps in Hogwarts, if he had to choose; immobilised and then dropped off the edge of the Astronomy Tower, so that he may contemplate his many sins during the brief journey to the ground.

Scrimgeour offers Severus the plush chair in front of his desk and takes the leather seat opposite. Steepling his fingers, Scrimgeour surveys him. The other wizard had been at Hogwarts at the same time as Severus; he had been Head Boy for Severus' first year, which Severus remembers vividly as it had been the last Slytherin Head Boy until Regulus. They had never spoken, but Severus had kept tabs on the other man's career and had been cautiously relieved to hear from Percy that he'd been squirrelled away by the Order.

"Not so sure what to do with you," Scrimgeour says finally.

Severus smiles thinly. "I am partial to the Killing Curse myself."

Scrimgeour raises his bushy eyebrows. "You've caused quite a fuss by refusing to talk. You've quite the small but vocal band of supporters, insisting it was all a plan by the esteemed late Albus Dumbledore." Scrimgeour waves his hand in the air, as if to encompass

all of the emotional revelations and arguments that Severus had caused indirectly to occur. On his part, Severus cannot think who might have comprised his *band of supporters;* Narcissa, perhaps?

“I did not want my past to be aired in front of the public,” Severus says in response to the implied criticism. He smiles thinly. “I am prepared to accept the consequences of that decision.”

Scrimgeour looks slyly at Severus and says lightly, “Did you not hear? You've been pardoned. Early this morning. Executive order by the Minister; a privately sealed decision. I’ll take your thanks whenever you can muster it; I’ve finally adjusted back to English time, only to be rudely awoken at five in the bleedin’ morning.”

Severus is uncomfortably reminded of the first Wizarding War, when he'd been in a similar position, though much less reconciled to his death when Albus had saved him so magnanimously. Irritation sharpens his tone. "Nobody thought to inform me, I gather."

"I most definitely sent a missive," the Minister says blandly. Severus wants to roll his eyes. Perhaps the Minister wanted to flex his arm of power, or punish Severus for his misdeeds; certainly no missive would have been sent to Azkaban. Though Severus cannot say he dislikes Scrimgeour, he can see plainly that the other wizard is expecting tears of gratitude, or something equally inane, and Severus cannot bring himself to indulge him, pardon or not.

Instead, he only asks, his voice carefully even, "Whose testimony was sufficient to free me?"

"Anonymous parties," Scrimgeour replies, enunciating the words carefully. "Or rather, parties that wish very much to remain anonymous."

Albus' portrait, more likely than anything, or perhaps Narcissa or perhaps Minerva. Severus mentally reviews the content of the scroll that he’d sent her. Merlin, he hopes she hadn’t been stupid enough to show it to the Minister. He hadn’t envisioned being alive for the fallout of his action; for once, he’d thought he had the freedom to be reckless, to deposit a problem into the laps of some other people, rather than himself.

Arrogant, tsks a voice in his head that sounds rather like the Dark Lord. *You’ve always been arrogant, Severus.*

"You are not surprised to see that I have miraculously returned from the dead," Scrimgeour says, enjoying his own private amusement. "You should hear some of the things they are saying about me."

"I would hope that you had informed them all in return that your stalwart assistant faked your death," Severus responds coolly. Percy would be rolling in his grave to hear that even after his death, those who ought to know better continue to disavow him. Severus considers again the scroll he'd impulsively sent Minerva and cannot say he regrets it. The boy would get his recognition, one way or another.

"So you did know." Scrimgeour nods to himself, as if confirming a private theory.

Severus' face immediately sours. To think of hordes of ignorant, supercilious wizards pawing through his memoirs as if they were the latest serial novel, condescendingly discussing his motivations, claiming to understand his actions, to assume they knew what drove his decisions—

"Calm yourself, Severus," the Minister says with a loud, booming laugh. Severus grits his teeth and wonders deliberately how Percy had handled Scrimgeour's forced joviality instead of contemplating which of the many spells to torture that Severus knows intimately would be *best* used to wipe the smile off the other man's face. A second later, Scrimgeour leans forward, and his face is serious, now, and his tone sombre. "I owe Percy Weasley my life," he says seriously. "And I do not intend to share what I learned this morning from Minerva. In truth, it gladdens me to know that he was not alone in his task."

Severus gives a short, abrupt nod, releasing his fingers from their tense grip on his wand. "What excuse do you plan to use to justify my release?"

"The truth," Scrimgeour says, as if it ought to be obvious. At Severus' tense shoulders, he raises an eyebrow. "You were working for Albus Dumbledore. His portrait confirmed it."

"With," Severus cannot help but correct. "Not for."

The look that Scrimgeour gives Severus is strangely understanding. "Yes," the Minister says softly. "My mistake. You were working *with* Albus Dumbledore and Percy Weasley. You were instrumental in orchestrating the defeat of the man we called Lord Voldemort."

Severus manages to control his instinctive flinch at the name, but something in Scrimgeour's face informs him that he did not manage to hide it entirely. Three months in Azkaban and Severus has lost some of his edge, some of the instinctive control over his body and his features that had been his greatest weapon in this war. Not like Percy, whose thoughts so often writ themselves across his face, though he soon learned to adopt the carefully blank mask that all of the Dark Lord's followers, at some point, perfected. "Am I to pay a fine?"

"A *fine?"* The Minister shakes his head incredulously. "Merlin's beard, Severus. We're going to give you an Order of Merlin."

Severus' instinctive rush of revulsion is so swift and absolute that his magic flares around him, darkly upset. *Calm down*, he orders himself harshly. The time in Azkaban has influenced him far more than he'd thought; he will need to undergo extensive repair to his shields and his controls before he can be in public. If he is not to…die, he will have to practise once again how to live. "No."

"I'm afraid this is not negotiable," Scrimgeour says coolly. His eyes watch Severus carefully, and Severus straightens, wiping all traces of emotion from his face.

"I will refuse it—publicly, if I must."

Severus has never been inside the office of the Minister of Magic before, though he knows that Percy spent a majority of his time inside the plush interior. He allows his eyes to rove over the details, noticing the elaborate detailing on the trim, the enchanted window, the

stately wooden desk—anything to avoid having to meet Scrimgeour's eyes, which seem to sear over the distance between them. Severus does not know what Scrimgeour wants, and that makes him uncomfortable. Surely the neatest solution to the conundrum at hand is to pardon Severus quietly and release him to his own devices, never to be seen of again? To elevate Severus to the position of receiving an Order of Merlin, to force him into the spotlight, to be publicly reviled and scorned, to make a mockery of the system of honours that stretch back far before either of them…

Scrimgeour breaks the silence. His voice is urgent, strangely so. "We owe you our lives as well. Or do you deny that?"

I did not do it for you. Severus firms his lips and remains silent. They will either execute him or leave him be; he has said his piece and he no longer needs to participate in this conversation.

Scrimgeour sighs to himself tiredly. "This conversation is not over," he warns Severus. "But I recognise that you came to my office expecting to die, and you may need some time to understand the news that I've given you today."

So Severus is allowed to leave, allowed to collect his meagre personal effects from Azkaban—the Bulstrode boy looks damned thrilled to see him alive, which embarrasses Severus in front of Scrimgeour—and allowed to make his way to whatever hovel suits him best. Of the options, Severus chooses his house.

He endures nearly an hour of silence, sitting in the downstairs parlour with his cup of tea, before the mockery from the dust under the chairs and the stains on the wall rises to an unbearable pitch. For some reason, all he can imagine is Percy's face, the first time he'd been taken to this room, his surprise that the formidable Potions Master of Hogwarts lived in such a dank, depressing place. Percy had created for himself quite the plush flat, though the rooms he had rented were small and narrow. The desk that Percy had bought for himself had probably cost more money than all the furniture inside Severus' pathetic excuse for a home office, not to mention the expensive rug underfoot and the satin sheets.

It seems so starkly *unfair* that Severus is alive and the boy is dead, that the pathetic state of his ancestral Muggle home seems to mock the boy's good name. Severus finds himself standing and directing a battalion of cleaning charms onto the multitude of stains, smudges, and smears marring the unpleasant rooms where he'd grown up before he can think too closely on why his throat feels tight, almost as if caught in a sob.

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Severus visits Lily's house, of course, though Lily has not lived there for nearly two and a half decades. The Muggle family that owns the house now has a young boy and an insufferable dog, and Severus hides beneath a Disillusionment Charm until they all troop out of the house to some cheery outing to the local park. Severus would tell them that the child is

more likely to encounter cigarette bums and shattered bottles than squirrels and leaves at the park, or at least the park that they seemed to be walking toward, but they've plainly just moved into the neighbourhood, and Severus supposes it will be an educational experience for the family to understand that *left* is not the correct direction to walk when leaving their row of manicured houses.

Lily's parents had never been wealthy, but they'd existed in a level of middle-class comfort that had seemed alien to Severus, who had been born into a smudge of dirt and never outgrown his grimy surroundings. As Severus moves soundlessly through the kitchen, largely unchanged saved for the row of gleaming modern Muggle appliances on the counter, he can vividly picture Lily and her father teaching him how to make a cucumber and cheese sandwich, the edges cut off so *wastefully*. Severus had watched the edges with eagle eyes until Lily's father, a strange expression passing through his face, had caught him at it and piled them all on the rim of Severus' plate.

The memory embarrasses him now, and he shakes his head, trailing one finger over the gleaming countertops. Why Lily's parents had allowed her to associate with him would always be a mystery to him. Perhaps it would have been better for all parties if they had warned her away from the dirty boy with the large nose. Certainly Petunia had nobly tried her best.

In the backyard, the large oak tree with the wide, smooth branches still towers overhead, though Severus is discomfited to realise that his head brushes the lowest branches. One of Lily's most visible indications of magic had occurred when she'd fallen off the spindly branch with the cleft midway through its bough. Her magic had caught her and carried her safely down, and Severus had caught the frightened, puzzled looks that her parents had exchanged, though they had switched to relief only seconds later.

That look had stayed with him, and he'd spent the next week hiding from Lily, convinced that *he* was the cause of her magic, that *he* was bringing the magic out of her, that *he* would be responsible for her parents treating her with the same disgusted horror that Tobias ladled on his son at every opportunity.

Severus shakes his head, smiling bitterly, and snaps a small branch off the edge of the bough, putting the spindly twig in his pocket. He leaves behind the Evans residence and continues to walk down the well-manicured path, noting familiar fence posts and porch lights as his feet carry him automatically down the street. Lily and Severus had spent a majority of their time at the river, but he would always walk her home, as his mother had raised him to do, though she would have been horrified to know that his well-bred manners were being used on a dirty Mudblood girl.

Four streets down there is a small chapel, and Severus, his fingers still clasped over the twig in his pocket, hesitates and then strides in. The chapel is silent, as he'd always imagined it would be, and empty. He takes a seat in the back row and sits quietly, folding and unfolding a small leaf between his fingers.

His family had not been religious, of course, and neither had Lily's, though he can remember that the Evans had visited the chapel irregularly, as most of the families in the neighbourhood had. Severus had never been inside, but he'd always imagined that there would be an air of

serenity, of holiness, of peace, something that would resonate deep inside him, something that might nip at his chest but ultimately bring him comfort.

But it is only a building, and though he bows his head and tries to reach out with his awareness to sense anything special around him, he finds that it smells like wet paint and plaster, and the bench is hard beneath his legs, and if he concentrates he can hear the priest on the telephone in the other room, organising some sort of summer service.

His feet carry him instead to the river, to the spot where he'd used to meet with Lily, under the wide branches of the willow. Severus crosses his legs and leans against the branch with only a hint of self-consciousness; he is still under the Disillusionment Charm, so he is as invisible as he can get without Potter's hallowed cloak. His body aches in this position, more so than it used to, but he forces his legs to comply and looks out at the softly moving water.

Lily, what am I supposed to do?

Five days he'd spent savagely scouring his house, cleaning every single cobweb and smear of dirt, ridding the place of all of the sad, dingy furniture that his mother had managed to obtain from yard sales and rummage bins and donations. He'd ruthlessly trashed every single one of the unmatched mugs and chipped porcelain plates, binned the broken mirrors in the downstairs bathroom and the ugly hand towels that had hung next to the chipped toilet, and reduced the sofa that he used to cower behind to a satisfying pile of ash. He'd purchased back the essentials: a bed, a chair, a desk.

It had only taken him five days to transform his house from the place of his memories to something slightly improved, and he'd stretched out each task to take as long as it possibly could, carrying the furniture by hand out of the door, bagging it manually into large trash bags, and scheduling a time for the local garbage company to pick up the remnants of his parents' things. On this, the sixth day, he'd completed the walk that he'd been dreading, through Lily's neighbourhood and down to the river. He supposes he ought to talk to Minerva, who had been sending him daily owls that he carefully ignored.

But repentance did not seem to be coming to him any more easily in this corner of the world than it had in Azkaban.

His life stretches in front of him, so damned *long* and unstructured, that it in truth fills him with a sharp edge of anxiety.

Lily would have countless hobbies to pursue, countless passions to develop, countless friends to support. Even at twenty, Lily had been the most interesting person he'd known.

Lily, please. Help me.

But Lily does not answer. Of course Lily does not answer; Severus has not heard anything from Lily, not for the last seventeen years.

Percy's voice echoes in his head, unbidden and unwelcome. *Yet if I could ask you one thing, it would be that you <u>live</u>, Severus, free of guilt. Do not waste the gifts you have been given, nor the skills you have painfully obtained.*

The part of the riverbank that belongs to Percy does not provide any answers that Lily's corner had kept from him. *Live, Severus, free of guilt.* Severus tosses a handful of stones savagely into the water and watches blankly as the ripples spread over the surface of the water. "It should have been you," he says into the air. "Both of you."

If Percy had been in front of him, dangling that infernal letter in front of his face, Severus would have told him one thing: that to *live* had always been his curse and his burden, and that if Severus could choose one thing to do with his freedom, it would not be to live at all.

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Thus, Severus agrees to meet with Minerva, the next time that she sends him a shrieking owl requesting his presence. He makes it to Hogwarts the manual way: the Knight Bus, the long walk from Hogsmeade. He goes with his robes pulled over his head, his face Transfigured just slightly as to be less recognisable. Minerva would have allowed him to Floo into the office, but something inside of Severus wants to walk through the grounds of Hogwarts for the last time, smelling the sharp pine resin and hearing the slither of the wind through the leaves.

Minerva meets him at the gates. Severus had been curious, despite himself, as to whether the wards would still recognise him, but Minerva opens the gates with a subtle gesture of her fingers before he can test his access. He stills his hand by his side and nods tersely at her.

Her face is impassive, but Severus has spent over a decade as her colleague. She holds herself stiffly and inclines her head with an abrupt, jerky movement. Nervous.

"Severus."

"Minerva."

For a prolonged second they stare at each other, their positions so swiftly reversed from just a few months prior. Then, Minerva turns on her heel and motions him forward. "Let's go to… my office."

A barely perceptible pause before *my*. Severus contemplates that as they walk through the castle. Perhaps Minerva has not adjusted to the oddity of Albus' office answering to her any more than Severus had in his short tenure as the Headmaster of Hogwarts.

Indeed, when Minerva opens the passageway to the office— *Albus*, she says, as if an intruder could not easily guess that password—he sees that she, like he, had barely changed the interior. Where Severus' display of potions and books had replaced Albus' glittering silver instruments, Minerva has set out a selection of mundane and rare materials, everything from simple wooden branches to expensive gemstones. The rest of the room remains the same.

"Severus," says Albus, and Severus smiles bitterly at his former master.

Minerva settles herself behind the Headmaster's desk with some hesitation. Severus would have told her that there is a manual way to adjust the height of the seat, as the chair is spelled against magics, but she will figure it out in time, as he did. What she does next surprises him; with a whispered command, all of the portraits fall silent, including Albus.

Severus blinks. He had not known that was possible. All of his conversations with Albus had been careful, with the knowledge that dozens of portraits were listening. The former Headmasters and Headmistresses of Hogwarts were bound to silence as commanded by the current occupant of the office, but Severus had never expected to hold the position for a long time. If they failed in their task, it could be Voldemort who next sat where Minerva now sits.

Minerva smiles wryly at his surprise. "I've not figured out all of the secrets of this office, but I'm making my way through them best I can."

Severus remains silent. There are a variety of things that he could say, and none of them seem suitable.

Minerva, luckily, has always understood him better than most. She brings her hands together over the desk, interlacing her fingers, and eyes him from under her emerald green glasses. Severus has the thought, as he's had several times before, that his former professor has perfected the art of making even grown men feel eleven years old under the force of that gaze. "I received your scroll," she says crisply, moving them swiftly past the conversational quagmire that small talk would have entailed. "I have not shared it in its entirety with anyone, even Albus, though I copied over a selection of details to share with the Minister to stand in as your testimony."

"Which details?"

"Nearly all of them," Minerva admits, "though I wrangled Rufus into an Unbreakable Vow. I told him of the Horcruxes, of Mr. Weasley's discovery of them during his time at Hogwarts, and of your furtive quest to destroy them without Voldemort's knowledge."

This time, Severus does not flinch, at least not externally. He merely nods. He cannot say he agrees with her decision to inform Scrimgeour of the Horcruxes, but he is their Minister of Magic, and to force him into an Unbreakable Vow would have been no easy feat.

Minerva continues, "I admit, the news of Mr. Weasley's…prior activities were difficult to read. I thank you for including the entire truth, or what I presume is the closest to the entire truth that you would ever share with anyone. It explained much that I still did not understand."

Severus frowns despite himself. He had included details on Percy's time travel largely to underscore the great personal risk that the boy had foolishly taken, and to ensure that another person would know the details after Severus was executed. What had it explained for Minerva?

"Mr. Weasley revealed much to me, though inadvertently," Minerva explains, noting the ripple of confusion that crossed over his face. "He often displayed knowledge of magic far beyond his years, and a conviction in his activities that could not be explained merely by fear

of what Voldemort may grow to be. That he had lived through it once before clarified his knowledge and his dedication."

"He did not live through it before," Severus corrects. "At least not in the way that you are imagining. Much changed with his interference, though he…was loath to admit it."

"I am not suggesting otherwise," Minerva says crisply. "It is clear to me, even without knowledge of the prior timeline, that his activities would have changed a great deal, presumably for the positive. I was pointing out only that it would take a strong wizard to willingly live through Voldemort's reign, merely for the faintest chance of defeating him."

Severus nods and subsides back into silence. He is impatient for Minerva to reveal why she brought him here. Severus does not enjoy speaking about Percy Weasley, even as it lifts a minute burden off of his shoulders to know that his scroll had the intended effect on Minerva.

"Why did you not tell me earlier?" Minerva leans forward, some of her forced formality dropping away from her frame as she asks the question. "I am one of the most knowledgeable experts on the field of time magic, as you very well know, Severus. I had worked in the Department of Time at the Ministry before I left to resume my apprenticeship with Albus. I held Mr. Weasley in high regard, and I knew enough of your story to trust you, Severus. Mr. Weasley told me, in his own way, what was to come; he hinted that Albus was dying, and that you would be the one to kill him."

Severus cannot help his surprise from wrinkling his eyebrows. "Percy *told* you this?"

"And you did not know," Minerva confirms tartly, "Because I am capable of subtlety when needed. You could have trusted me, Severus, to keep your secrets."

Percy had not told him that he had revealed such a thing to Minerva. Irritation colours his tone when he snaps, "I could not trust anyone, Minerva."

"Did you trust Mr. Weasley?"

Stymied, Severus snaps his mouth shut and glowers at her. She knows the truth to this, even as it shames him, and makes him feel vulnerable.

"I am glad," Minerva says, to his surprise. She smiles at him then, and to Severus' great disgust it almost makes him feel warm. "To know that you could trust each other. Your esteem for him is clear in this letter."

Severus cannot begin to explain the complicated tangle of feelings that exists deep within him, his persistent irritation at Percy's optimistic foolishness, his regret over the boy's death, all of those moments of surprise when Percy had opened his mouth and changed the direction of the war indelibly. Severus had re-watched that final interaction between Percy, Lucius, and Voldemort, and on the fourth or fifth viewing he'd finally seen how neatly Percy had distracted the Dark Lord, how capably he'd led him toward the conclusion that he ought to challenge Potter despite the threat of the Elder Wand, how slyly he'd manipulated Voldemort's hatred of Albus.

“He did not deserve to die as he did,” Severus says finally, the only thing that he can say with conviction and clarity.

Minerva’s response surprises him. Guilt is written all over her lined face, his instincts reading it off of her involuntary grimace to his statement before she has the presence of mind to clear her expression.

“What,” Severus demands, his hand curling over his wand.

“I promised not to tell you,” Minerva says softly, and he tenses, uncomfortable with the currents of emotions swirling around the room. “But it is clear to me that you care for him, as I have rarely seen you care for anyone else.”

A pulse jumps in his throat as he clenches his jaw together, angered at the reference to Lily and the presumption that she understands his feelings toward the boy. “What is it that you have withheld from me?”

Perhaps Potter was the one to kill Percy, or Minerva herself, or any of the Order members foolishly believing that they knew the truth. Perhaps Percy survived the initial attack, only to succumb to his injuries later. Perhaps they had watched Percy turn his wand on himself and remained motionless while he took his own life.

“Percy Weasley is alive,” Minerva says gently, and Severus’ world shatters again.

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March 1998

When Percy awakens for the first time, it takes him several long minutes to realise where he is.

He’s lying on his back, in a bed. The ceiling is white and well-lit with bright lamps. He cannot smell any particular scent, or hear any particular sounds, and so for a few minutes he just stares up at the ceiling and cannot remember who he is. There’s a strange bliss in it, in the not knowing. He luxuriates in it for a few brief seconds before his brain immediately flags the drowsily content feeling as alien and clangs a loud alarm.

Something is missing, and he shivers when he realises it, his first movement since he woke up and blinked sleepily at the ceiling. Something is missing…a limb? No, he can feel his hands and wiggle his toes. Maybe he is deaf?

“Percy,” says a voice, and he flinches, a movement that runs through his entire body and leaves him groaning in pain. So he can hear, then, and his name is Percy. Percy Weasley. He is twenty one years old and thirty four years old. A candle; Hogwarts; a great tear in the sky, a terrible sadness, a deep longing for what could not be.

“Tom,” he says, his eyes widening with panic. But the face that swims into his field of vision is one that is vaguely, although not immediately, familiar. His tired brain takes a few extra seconds to supply the name. Madam Pomfrey. Hogwarts. He is at Hogwarts.

“Tom is dead,” says another voice. Percy turns his head slightly and flinches again. Harry, with a face like crumbling granite. Harry screaming, sobbing, crying, jerking madly through the air. *You'll never understand what it's like to have something worth dying for.*

“I’m…sorry,” Percy manages to get out. Harry looks away abruptly and jams his hands into his pockets and Percy closes his eyes in shame.

"Mr. Weasley," says a third voice, softly, and Percy drags his gaze over to his right. Professor McGonagall. She is looking grim and old, and it takes him a moment to register her voice. He is feeling so tired, so sluggish, and still with that mysterious feeling of loss. "Mr. Weasley, do you remember what happened?"

Tom—torture—magic—Hogwarts—castle—blackness.

"No," he whispers.

"You killed...Tom," McGonagall says, and Percy follows her gaze over to Harry, who nods brusquely. "And something backfired."

"The vow," Percy says involuntarily, and he screws his eyes shut. He does not need to hear McGonagall's next words to understand what happened to him.

He has lost his magic. He had been trying to die, to use his dying wish to do good in the world, to wipe his slate clean. He had not wanted to wake. He had nothing to wake for, not now. Tom has taken everything from his heart, from his tired soul, and now he has taken his magic too.

He is nothing more than a Muggle, a squib. It would be better if he were blind or dead. He'd rather lose a limb than his magic. Panicking, he reaches out with his magic but of course, nothing happens.

His blood thuds hotly in his ears. Normally if he concentrates he can hear the thin hum of his magic around him, the constant noise no wizard is ever without. His hand reaches out and flexes, but no spark appears to dance around his fingers. He is so cold. He is so tired. He does not remember what it felt like before. He cannot forget.

"A vow," repeats McGonagall, her voice heavy. "That explains much. Can you tell us the vow, Mr. Weasley?"

"I swore on my magic not to harm Tom Riddle," Percy explains, his voice dull. "It was the only way he would trust me."

Vaguely, Percy is aware that the other occupants of the room are muttering, that Pomfrey is bending over him casting diagnostic spells. It matters not. He has lost his magic; he is no longer a wizard. He may as well be dead. Why isn’t he dead?

McGonagall has to repeat his name several times to get his attention. He looks at her expressionlessly, not bothering to raise his head from the pillow.

"We are going to try and fix this," she promises. "But we need to know everything that happened. Can you tell us?"

"Is the war over?" Percy asks tonelessly.

"Yes," says McGonagall, reaching down to squeeze his hand. He cannot control another flinch at her touch. "Yes. You're safe now."

He does not react. "Then it does not matter what happened."

He cannot be budged to say another word. Not by McGonagall or Harry, not by Ginny or Draco or Ron or Hermione, not by Tonks or Shackebolt or Scrimgeour. Percy spends many days in the hospital staring silently at the ceiling. Many people talk to him, but he allows their voices to pass over him like a gentle breeze. He cannot reach into his mind like he once could, but he can feel his mental shields hovering over the bounds of his consciousness, broken and screaming. He wraps his hand around the grey stone that is still in his pocket, but it feels cool and inert to the touch. He is already in Hogwarts, and he can see the effects of the magic around him—the floating lanterns in the Hospital Wing, the elf assigned to monitor his progress, the portraits on the walls—but he views them as if from behind a great glass wall, inviolate and cold, a wall of ice.

He does not really think, either. He does not reflect on the journey that brought him here; he does not consider his regrets, or his hopes. He most particularly does not think about Tom.

From what he does hear—and can't filter out—the war is over. He knows Scrimgeour has survived and is the Minister because Scrimgeour comes and tells him, and requires a verbal confirmation that Percy was listening before he leaves. Shacklebolt steps down politely from interim Minister, passed over again. Everyone important has survived, it seems. Fred. George. Ginny. The rest of them too.

This news is the only thing that can stir him, and when he hears he succeeded in at least those tasks, he feels all the more keenly that he ought to have died. He had completed his purpose. The rest doesn't really matter to Percy. Part of him wishes that it did.

“And Severus?” Percy asks hoarsely, one of the few words that he is able to summon.

McGonagall looks at him curiously. “He is in Azkaban, with the other Death Eaters, awaiting trial.”

So Severus survived, too. Percy exhales deeply, feeling limp and boneless with the relief, the mystery of Severus’ fate one of the remaining areas of tension propping his body into some semblance of attentiveness. Dumbledore’s portrait will provide testimony, or Andromeda, or even McGonagall herself. He stirs himself long enough to say, listlessly, “Don’t tell him.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Don’t tell him about…this.” Percy flushes under McGonagall’s frown and says softly, “Don’t mention me at all.”

“Mr. Weasley—”

“No,” Percy says strongly, his voice echoing through this ward. “You will not speak to him of me. None of you. You owe me this, at least.”

Myrtle tries to come by his bed, to hover near him, to speak of him of death. He looks away. He does not listen. He has become very adept at not listening, at retreating into the only part of him that still feels like it is his. Even Myrtle’s voice flows over him harmlessly when he does this, like the buzz of the magic that used to be omnipresent in his life. He knows he is hurting her; he can see her ghostly tears drip cool recriminations onto his arm, but how can he explain that he has nothing more to say?

(“I understand what it’s like, Percy, to wake up and not have your magic.”

“But you’re dead, Myrtle. I couldn’t even manage that.”

“You were trying to die?”

“Of course I was trying to die, Myrtle.” He mimics her voice nastily. “*There’s power in a dying wish*. Bloody hell, Myrtle.”

A pause; a shimmer through the air as Myrtle shifts uncomfortably. "What…what were you wishing for?”

He does not answer.)

After several days of this, Percy is moved to Grimmauld Place. Nobody knows where his flat is, except for perhaps Tonks, and he flatly refuses to tell them, so someone, somewhere, makes the decision that Percy would be better off under the Grimmauld Place wards. Most of the Death Eaters have been captured, but not all, and there is a subset of rebels who would probably love to tear Percy to bits with their bare arms.

Andromeda brings him to Grimmauld Place, though she leaves shortly after depositing him in the kitchen. Percy finds Andromeda’s company the most bearable; after her initial effort to rouse him, she does not try fruitlessly to wake him from his stupor, and she never mentions difficult topics like the others who seem to view it their personal mission to help Percy become content with his new lot in life. (If Hermione tells him one more time that there really are amazing Muggle inventions that are almost like magic, he’s going to kill her.) Percy is unsteady on his feet after laying on his back for so long, and Kreacher has to assist him in walking up the long thin stairs.

He chooses Regulus' room: he doesn't think the other man would mind, and the tasteful decorations are soothing. Andromeda replaces the bed for him silently, but otherwise leaves the room unchanged.

His days in Grimmauld Place follow a set schedule. He wakes up and showers in one old, gritty bathroom without a working mirror, standing in the shower while the pipes groan and creak around him. Kreacher would clean it for him, if he asked, but he has told Kreacher to stay out of the rooms that he occupies. He walks down three flights of stairs, a task that sometimes takes him nearly an hour. Kreacher prepares him breakfast. He eats it silently. He looks at the moving pictures of the Daily Prophet without reading any of the articles. He sits in the kitchen for several hours, drinking the same cup of tea, while Kreacher sits at the table opposite him and polishes the old Black family silver by hand. He typically skips lunch; once Kreacher leaves the table, he goes upstairs and sleeps. Supper is again silent. Percy has a single glass of elf wine—Kreacher insists on serving it to him—and then he goes back to bed.

The solitude suits him. The schedule suits him. Percy keeps his mind carefully, intentionally blank. He does not try to use his magic again. He does not think about Tom.

Sometimes Andromeda comes and sits with him silently. Tonks, she explained the first day, finds it too difficult to see Percy. That is fine; he does not want Tonks to see him like this, a half-being, disgusting. Andromeda never saw him as anything other than a means to an end, and now his use has ended. They do not owe each other anything else. He expects she will cease her visits soon.

Draco comes once. He shouts at Percy, something about living with scars, brandishing his arm. They were Marked together. Though Draco had received the physical Mark a year later, that night would stand in both of their minds forever as the night that it had all begun. Likely it will always bind them. Percy does not see that it matters. On a Muggle, the remnants of the Dark Mark are nothing more than faded ink stains.

He is nothing, a man without purpose, without direction, without power. He may as well not have a name. He may as well be dead, and the only thing that he can focus his mind on is thinking how he will get there, once everyone stops watching him. Once they realise he has no value anymore.

**

April 1998

By the second month, Percy's plight is forgotten by largely everyone. Each of his siblings make a token effort to connect with him—Charlie and Bill come every week and chat quietly, mostly about Bill’s upcoming nuptials, while Percy listens silently—though Ginny and Ron come only once, both clearly uncomfortable in his presence. Fred and George send him loud, zany care packages, which he would admit only under pain of death occasionally make him laugh, offsetting some of the grey dreariness of Grimmauld Place. His parents come only once as well; Percy does not know what they had been told, but they do not move to touch him, or ask him questions, merely sitting with him through a cup of tea before leaving him be. Draco, surprisingly, is his most frequent visitor, but Percy dreads his visits the most, since

Draco shouts directly at him until Percy is required to fork over a series of short, curt answers until Draco is satisfied.

Percy is fairly sure that everyone else thinks that he is dead. He is not invited to anyone's trials, though Draco tells him of their outcome on every visit, nor is he required to be punished for his sins, nor is he celebrated for his dubious role in the proceedings. This last seems to bother Draco the most.

"You clearly did something," he says, frustrated, more than once. "Tonks says you passed her messages, and you were in the Order, and it was enough to clear you. But nobody knows what you did, or how you learned of the Horcruxes. I reckon you're a bloody hero, but nobody knows it except for you. Don't you want them to know?"

"They pardoned me," says Percy, when the silence stretches on to the point where he can tell that Draco is close to turning on him angrily. He does not finish the thought, that to be officially pardoned is more than he can ask for, and plenty of reward. When he does find the best way to pass quietly from this world, at least his parents will not be ashamed of him.

"I reckon you ought to have an Order of Merlin," Draco says sulkily. Percy had told Draco of his role in Lucius' death, but Draco, demonstrating a maturity far beyond his years, had told Percy that he'd left behind Lucius a token when he'd fled from Malfoy Manor, a token that should have indicated clearly to his father that he'd left of his own accord. If Lucius had felt it necessary to involve himself again with the Dark Lord, after Percy and Severus had given him an iron-clad excuse to flee the country—or so Draco said—then that was his own fault. "You'd be written up in all the history books. Don't you want that?"

Does he indeed. Percy had dreamt of this moment for so many years—a shining vision in a mirror, his family alive, his actions justified, the apologies and tears and gratitude—but now that it is here, he finds he couldn't care less.

The people important to him had not trusted him, or perhaps they had trusted him too much. Percy had loved Tom, at the end; he'd loved him, he'd kissed him, he'd offered in the privacy of his soul to help Tom heal. He was a traitor, and he had paid the ultimate price for it. What punishment could they levy that was worse than what he'd received? What reward would not be predicated on falsehood?

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June 1998

Percy may have carried on in a haze of listlessness for the rest of his life if it weren't for the large picture of Severus Snape behind bars that adorns the morning Prophet in early June. **SNAPE SENTENCED TO DEATH,** the headline says, striking enough to permeate even Percy's practised stupor.

With a jolt, he sits up. His throat is so scratchy from disuse it takes him several tries to clear it. "Kreacher," he croaks finally. "What's going on with Severus?"

Kreacher looks up in surprise, but he is well-trained or disinterested enough not to comment on Percy's miraculous return to the world of conversation. "Master Bat is on trial for his crimes of war," Kreacher says conversationally. "Mistress Black tells you yesterday."

Percy thinks back, but he cannot even remember Andromeda visiting him yesterday, let alone her telling him that Severus was on trial. After Percy's explosion at McGonagall, she'd assured him tartly that neither nor Andromeda even spoke his name to Severus, which had made him feel a bit ashamed but far more relieved. That Severus had not contacted him—though Narcissa had written Draco a letter during her brief stint in Azkaban—had not been particularly surprising. First, Percy doubted Severus had anything to say to him that could be expressed in a letter couried by another person, and second, Percy doubted Severus had anything to say to him at all. Much like Andromeda, his use for Percy would have ended with the conclusion of the war.

"But sentenced to death?" Percy shakes his head. "Kreacher, he can't die. He doesn't deserve to die."

Kreacher shrugs, one ear drooping. "Kreacher thinks it does not matter what Master Bat deserves."

"No—wait, Kreacher, no." Percy rubs his eyes with an exhausted hand and realises that he is growing a beard. "Kreacher, I can't let him die. Not like this."

"What does the Dark Weasley Child want Kreacher to do?" Kreacher asks, apprehensively.

Percy casts around for an idea, but again so many days of inaction, his mind is sluggish and unresponsive. Severus in Azkaban—it feels to him like a story, like something that happened in his previous life, distant and remote. "Hogwarts," he says finally. The sound of the world clangs uncomfortably in his stomach. For a second, he hesitates. Can he even… *go* to Hogwarts? Could he…bear it?

"Take me to Andromeda," he says instead, flushing angrily as Kreacher regards him with large, worried eyes. "Or bring Andromeda here. Anything."

"Should Kreacher—"

"Bring Andromeda here," Percy orders. "Just get her, please, Kreacher. I can't…I can't travel."

Even the idea of leaving Grimmauld Place is frightening to him. He casts his mind back but he cannot remember the last time he went outside. Sometimes when Charlie comes, he flings open all of the blinds and forces the sunlight to filter in through the stained windows, but Charlie has been in Romania for a few weeks now, and so Percy has not even drawn back the heavy black drapes.

Some part of his old self stirs as he sits silently at the kitchen table. He is wearing yesterday's clothes, and not even robes at that, only a pair of trousers and a long sleeved shirt. But Percy pictures himself wearing Wizarding robes and grimaces at the embarrassing picture that would present. No, why should he clean himself? His appearance reflects his true self, now that he cannot cast a Glamour charm to hide it.

To his surprise, when Kreacher returns with Andromeda, she is not alone. McGonagall follows her into the kitchen, trailed by a sullen Harry. Percy drags his gaze quickly away from Harry. He has not seen him since that awful first day, when he first learned...

Percy looks instead at Kreacher, who pulls on his long ears apologetically. "Madam Black was not alone," he explains.

"I was at Hogwarts, actually," Andromeda explains crisply. "Saw the paper, did you?"

"Why—" Percy begins, before he falls silent. He does not need to know why Andromeda was at Hogwarts; Hogwarts is no longer his concern.

McGonagall answers him anyway. She has not visited him either, but Percy can only imagine the veritable mountain of work she must be under, and anyway, he'd figured it would be as painful for her to see her former pupil in his state as it would be for him to see his former mentor. Better for them to leave their relationship in the past. "We were trying to figure out the password that Severus used for the Headmaster's office."

"Oh." Percy swallows and then, continuing to avoid Harry's gaze, looks only to Andromeda. "Why is he…I mean, you must know he…helped."

"Did he?" Harry inquires coolly.

Andromeda gives Harry an unimpressed glance. "As I have explained before, Mr. Potter, Severus destroyed one of the Horcruxes and helped me to destroy another." She looks to Percy before Harry can muster up an objection. "Mr. Potter insists we cannot reveal that the Dark Lord had Horcruxes, and Severus is refusing to testify. Do you have anything we could speak to that doesn't involve Horcruxes?"

Percy frowns at Harry despite himself. "You would condemn him to death, knowing that he aided in the Dark Lord's defeat, merely because you do not wish for anyone to learn about the Horcruxes? Surely you could tell the Minister and bind him to a vow."

Harry raises a challenging eyebrow. "Vows can be broken."

Percy flushes angrily and looks at the rough grain of the kitchen table, the admonishment landing like a blow.

"Mr. Potter," snaps McGonagall, to Percy's surprise. "There is no call to be rude. Mr. Weasley, I have suggested the same. My concern is that without knowing Severus' true motives, merely submitting evidence that he aided in the destruction of the Horcruxes would not be sufficient to clear his name. He is on trial for a number of crimes, all very serious. His

opponents could easily argue that he was destroying the Horcruxes, or pretending to, in order to wrestle control from Voldemort himself.”

Percy flinches at the name, which he is sure does not go unnoticed. Crossing his toes inside his shoes, he forces himself to look up. "Severus was part of the Order since the previous war. He operated on Dumbledore's orders for over a decade."

"Until he killed Dumbledore."

“After Harry said as much to the crowds, there was no saving Severus,” interjects Andromeda dryly.

Harry glowers at her. “I wasn’t going to let them string up *Draco* instead.”

Percy frowns behind his glasses. "But Dumbledore asked Severus to kill him."

He is surprised to see the shock cross Harry's face. Surely Dumbledore's portrait would have —oh. Of course. They cannot get to Dumbledore's portrait, not without the password to the office. McGonagall and Andromeda's motives suddenly become far clearer to Percy, whose mind is also slowly clearing from its slow, sleepy stasis. He has one more task, one last task, and then he can sleep, or whatever will bring him rest.

"Lily," he says quietly, and the protest that was midway out of Harry's mouth stalls and drops to the floor. "Try Lily. Or perhaps *Eileen*, if that does not work."

"Why—" Harry begins weakly.

"I see," says McGonagall, quietly. "I should have thought to try that."

Harry turns agonised eyes on McGonagall, who regards him soberly. Andromeda is silent; perhaps she knows the story, or can guess at it, or perhaps it is immaterial to her, as it ought to be for everyone except for Harry.

"What is it?" Harry demands, and McGonagall gives Percy a meaningful look, cool and refreshing from behind her familiar glasses. He closes his eyes to avoid it; he knows what she wants of him, and he does not think he can bear it.

"Severus was willing to die to not reveal his part of the story," Percy adds, with Andromeda's quiet acceptance in mind. "He refused to give testimony, knowing what it menat. He would be—ashamed to know we are speaking of it."

"Speaking of *what?"* Harry insists, his voice rising angrily. His eyes are bright and combative, and he looks angrily between McGonagall and Percy, as if they are playing some sort of elaborate joke on him.

Percy opens his mouth to tell Harry to go talk to Dumbledore, now that the office will presumably open for them. But he hesitates. Severus had been *willing to die* to preserve his secrets, or so he now sees, for Percy cannot imagine another reason for him to refuse to give testimony. Part of Percy wonders if he should honour Severus' final wishes; but a larger part

of him thinks stubbornly that he didn't lose his magic just for Severus to kill himself over his embarrassment.

And doesn't Percy owe it to Severus, to tell this story, so that Harry hears it from him and not Dumbledore? Merlin knows what omissions or inclusions Dumbledore will use to twist the truth to his narrative. Percy can at least tell Harry the truth, or something close to it.

"Severus Snape loved your mother," he says simply, looking again at the table to ground himself. "They were childhood friends; I have been to the neighbourhood where they both grew up. They maintained a friendship at Hogwarts, but it was difficult for Severus, who was already mocked for his Muggle upbringing."

"His—his Muggle upbringing?"

Percy can't help it; he takes a small modicum of pleasure in informing Harry that Severus grew up as a Muggle, in the midst of poverty, and with a father who— "treated him poorly," Percy says, coming to his senses at the very end of the sentence. Severus would be furious to know that Percy had revealed even this much.

But Harry is silent, as are McGonagall and Andromeda, digesting the information privately. More restrained, Percy continues on.

"In those days, there were no real options for someone like Severus, so he eventually fell in with a crowd who introduced him to *Him*. *He* was very kind to Severus, praising his intelligence and power, and personally tutoring him in magic." Percy pauses and then adds helplessly, at the dawning of rage clouding over Harry, "I'm not trying to excuse him, Harry. I'm just trying to explain his motivations. He felt he had no choice."

"There's *always* a choice."

"Only somebody with choices would think that," Percy cannot help but snap back. "Or have you felt always you could choose otherwise on this journey?"

At this, Harry subsides, and Percy hopes that he is finally listening. He takes a deep breath, and suddenly Kreacher is at his side, offering him a cup of tea. Percy takes it like a rope cast out to him at sea.

McGonagall steps in as Percy sips, something like warmth hovering at the edges of her tone, though Percy could not say whether the warmth was meant to be directed at him, Harry, or Severus. "Severus Snape was a brilliant student, but he was…unpopular, to say the least. Your father and his friends…made his life quite difficult."

Harry flinches violently at this, and something crosses over his face that changes his expression quite dramatically, until he looks more guilty than angry. "I've seen a memory…"

"To be brilliant and to be Slytherin was dangerous." Andromeda smiles without humour. "I left my family behind, but I had Ted and his family to fall back on. If Severus had been alone…"

Percy grips the mug of tea tightly and then takes up the reins of the story again. “Regardless of his motivations, he joined the Dark Lord after a falling out with Lily. He overhead a prophecy one night and told the Dark Lord what it contained without realising that it targeted your parents. The minute that he found out, he went straight to Dumbledore and begged him to protect you all.” Percy hesitates, but Harry does not seem inclined to interrupt him. “As far as I understand it, Dumbledore’s first question to him was to ask what he would give to Dumbledore in exchange for your parents' lives?”

“Surely not,” snaps McGonagall, unable to contain herself.

Percy shrugs. “Ask his portrait. Severus swore his fealty to the Order, and then spent the next seventeen years looking after you from afar, maintaining his cover as a follower of the Dark Lord. He and Dumbledore suspected the Dark Lord would return. Eventually, Dumbledore learned of the Horcruxes, though he never told Severus his suspicions. He put on the Gaunt family ring, and the Horcrux within him injured him, nearly to death. Given that he was going to die anyway, he asked Severus to do it himself, both to ensure he had a painless death, and to solidify Severus’ position with the Dark Lord.”

“I examined Albus myself,” McGonagall says apologetically to Harry. “I do believe that he was dying, though he did not choose to confide in me either, even when I pressed him for details.”

“So what,” demands Harry, “He thought that it would be best for Snape to *murder him* in cold blood? He said *please*, Professor.” Harry’s voice breaks, and Percy flinches away from the raw pain of it. “He begged Snape to save his life.”

Andromeda cuts in softly. “Or he begged Severus to end it.”

Percy looks up and catches Harry’s eyes. “It is not easy to kill, Harry. You’ve all but condemned a man you *knew* helped you win the war so that you could protect Draco from harm. Severus is his godfather, and Draco was ordered by the Dark Lord himself to kill Dumbledore, or have his family be killed for his failings. If Draco had failed and Severus too, the Dark Lord would have come to kill Dumbledore personally, and it would have been…” Percy shivers. “...gruesome."

Harry’s face very clearly indicates that he had not fully known of Draco’s part in the proceedings, or perhaps he had not considered that Severus had acted out of care of Draco or of Dumbledore. *He is young*, Percy thinks to himself heavily, and when he meets Andromeda’s eyes she smiles thinly at him in acknowledgment of what they both can see. Harry will need time to digest these events, to understand the complex web of motivations and mercies that bound them all up in the war.

Percy is already growing tired of his role in aiding the Boy Who Lived through this final task, but he forces himself to continue, at least to finish his sombre retelling of Severus’ actions. “So Severus killed Dumbledore, and the Dark Lord rewarded him by giving him control of Hogwarts, though he installed the Carrows to watch over him and report on his actions. I’m sure Ginny has quite a lot to say on how the year went, but I’d ask you both to consider that it could have been several degrees *worse.* In the meantime, he and I collaborated with Andromeda, Tonks, and others to find and destroy the remaining Horcruxes. Severus was the

one who stole the Elder Wand from Dumbledore's tomb to pass it to me; he helped us convince Narcissa to retrieve the items from the vault to cure Sirius from the curse; and he nearly died for you, Harry, multiple times." Percy shrugs one shoulder, unable to verbalise the extent of what Severus had done for Harry—or for Percy. "You do not understand, Harry, the balance we had to maintain. The Dark Lord had to kill you, but we had to ensure he did it at the right time, and without learning that you were a Horcrux. We had to destroy all of the Horcruxes first, so that the Dark Lord would be mortal and vulnerable. And we had to do all of this all while in the Dark Lord's presence."

Harry is silent for a prolonged period. Percy takes the opportunity to sip savagely at his cup of tea, wincing as the too-hot liquid slithers its way down his dry, raw throat. He has said more words today than he has since March, and he is incredibly exhausted by the effort that these words have required from him.

Soon you can rest.

When Harry speaks, his voice is still sharp. "Why do you call him the Dark Lord?"

"I'm sorry?"

"The Dark Lord. You don't call him *Voldemort."*

Percy cannot help but snort. "To call him V…Voldemort would have resulted in my immediate death," he points out coolly. "We did not all have the luxury of bravery. I suppose you want to quote Dumbledore's famous line at me? *Fear of the name only increases fear of the thing itself*. It's a lovely sentiment, but not particularly practical for some of us."

McGonagall frowns at him, and he subsides sheepishly. His emotions feel frayed and rattled, like a miscast—

Well. Not like anything that Percy has any experience in, anymore. Like the end of his cloak, perhaps, frayed and unravelling, too delicate to be stitched back together with a Knitting char —

Percy squeezes his toes together tightly and turns his attention back to Harry, who is not finished with him. Part of Percy can still feel the impression of Harry's magic, loose and unchained as it whips around the room with his volatile emotions. It makes Percy feel nauseated, and he takes another optimistic sip of tea, which is no easier to swallow than the first.

"You told Tom you loved him."

Percy closes his eyes. He has resolutely not thought of…of Tom, of the last day, of everything that transpired. His mouth seems to fill with saliva, his throat smarting and burning, and he tastes his blood, hot and metallic, as he bites down on the inside of his lip.

Forcing his eyes open, Percy meets Harry's gaze, unwavering and unforgiving. "I did," Percy admits shortly. "He was—important to me. But I did not want the Dark Lord to succeed."

"You are referring to one of the Dark Lord's Horcruxes," clarifies McGonagall, who has clearly been only partially briefed.

"You loved him," repeats Harry coolly. "Maybe Snape loved my mum, but he killed Dumbledore and likely dozens of others. Maybe you helped us destroy Voldemort, but you were a Death Eater too. All of you deserve to die."

Something inside Percy snaps and he finds himself standing before he can. "And Yaxley, who lied to the Dark Lord's face for you? Multiple times, I might add." Percy shakes his head angrily. "And Narcissa, who risked everything to take us to her vault, helping us to save Sirius and retrieve another Horcrux? You told me that Draco was able to get you back into this house; had you not considered that Narcissa and Draco could have tried earlier, and must have lied to the Dark Lord to make him believe otherwise? What about Lucius, who spent the last minutes of *his* life trying to save his son's? All of us, Harry? It's funny; that sounds like something *Voldemort* may say. I did not expect you to lack nuance."

"You have no idea what I've been through," yells Harry back, his face screwed in an expression of rage. "You have no idea what it's like to have Him in your head."

"I had Tom in my head for years!" Percy bellows back, in a voice that he does not recognise, the chair screeching beneath him as he stands. "I had Tom in my flat, in a portrait on my wall, a portrait that *I* painted after the diary possessed my younger sister! Tom nearly killed my father and made me watch, Harry. I had Tom watching me at work, and reporting everything I did to Him, and Tom following me home, and Tom *demanding* things from me. The Dark Lord chose me to be his sworn companion, do you know what that means? He trusted me with his life; Tom with his soul. I know every version of Tom better than I know myself, and I *loved* one of them, and I helped kill them all, do you understand? They trusted me above anyone else and *I killed them all*, and I wish I'd killed myself too."

He pauses, panting awkwardly, and realises belatedly that he was waiting for his magic to flare up with his anger. But of course his magic will never spark again. This knowledge takes the wind out of his chest, and he drops back into his seat, exhausted and sorrowful all over again.

"You painted a portrait of Tom?" McGonagall interjects, staring at Percy with narrowed eyes. "When you were in your sixth year?"

Percy shakes his head dispiritedly. "After Hogwarts," he mutters. "I'm not on trial, am I? Severus is the one that matters here. Harry, I know that he was awful to you, and I'm not defending him for that. He was a shoddy professor and he was cruel to you. But he saved your life, maybe all of our lives, and he does not deserve to be thanked like this. Give him an Order of Merlin, or let him live out the rest of his days alone, if he wants—but don't kill him just because he was mean to you."

It is Percy's turn to be admonished by McGonagall for his insulting words. But Percy is suddenly sick of all of them, even Andromeda, watching the events unfold silently. They would have let Severus die, just because the Chosen One was too stubborn to tell the truth of all of the Horcruxes to the Minister of Magic.

“I’ve told you what you need to know,” Percy says, standing and bowing shortly to Andromeda and then McGonagall before he realises, mid-bow, that he is no longer a pureblood wizard and therefore no longer allowed to use the Old Ways. Straightening, he turns away from them to hide the flush in his cheeks. “Ask Dumbledore for the rest, once you’re in the office.”

He makes it up two flights of stairs before he has to slow, his heart beating. He’d half-expected someone to go after him, but after he listens carefully for several minutes, he has to conclude that they’ve left him alone again to pursue the rest of the truth with Dumbledore. Good. Percy *wants* to be left alone.

“You’re welcome, Severus,” says Percy to the dark, stained wallpaper. He walks the rest of the way to Regulus’ room at a more sedate pace, pushing open the door and collapsing onto the bed. On the wall opposite, Tom’s familiar face smirks at him, and for the first time in three months, Percy props himself up on his elbows and stares at the newspaper clippings.

Percy has not allowed himself to think of those final moments. He has not allowed himself to think about the fact that he has lost his magic and is no longer a wizard. He has not allowed himself to think about Tom, or about his soul, or about his vow, or about the kiss that he’d so desperately flung at Tom in an attempt to say goodbye.

Percy has not allowed himself to think of any of those moments because once he starts thinking of them, they all flood in, and the guilt and resentment and sorrow and relief threaten to overwhelm him entirely. Without the aid of his mental library, his memories wobble unsteadily in his mind and nearly collapse in untidy stacks, colliding and merging in an unbearable confluence of conflicting emotions. Percy curls up underneath the blankets, his body shaking, and his face suddenly wet with tears that he does not recall shedding.

Oh, Merlin, oh, Merlin, oh *Tom*, what was he supposed to do now? Not a wizard, not a Muggle, barely a Squib. Not a war hero, not a Death Eater, barely a member of the Order. To have *Harry* stare at him with such cool hatred, to tell him he ought to die, to have Severus so close to death, to have McGonagall and Andromeda in the kitchen looking impossibly aged…

His parents have only come to see him once. *Once*. A wave of tears crashes back over Percy as he considers this, though he tries without success to force his mind away. He should not expect anything from his parents; hadn’t he thought to himself that he had barely allowed them to be his parents, that he’d barely asked them of anything, that they barely knew him? Hadn’t he nearly killed his father and stubbornly broken his mother’s heart, out of pride and anger and resentment? How could he have expected that his parents would have wanted to see him, even if he were still a wizard, after all of his sins had come to light?

(But he *did*. This is the weakness that Tom had always seen in him, and he cannot even deny it. He’d thought perhaps his parents *would* come, would sit with him quietly as Bill and Charlie do, would tell him that he was still their son, even though he was damaged irrevocably.)

And Ron and Ginny had only visited him once, and Hermione too, and Fred and George were too busy setting up their shop after Percy had burned down the first one. Tonks found it *too*

difficult to see him. Percy does not blame her; he hasn't looked at himself in the mirror for three months. Presumably Cedric feels the same.

Nobody has any use for you, he imagines Tom telling him pityingly, but perhaps without Percy's magic aiding his memories, he can no longer conjure up Tom's voice as accurately as before. Percy remembers entering a Muggle's mind with Tonks, the blurred, dim cast to the man's memories. Would that happen to him? Would he cease to remember everything?

"Maybe it's for the best," Percy mumbles out loud, wiping savagely at his face with one hand. Maybe he'll just forget all of it, his twist through time and those seven years at Hogwarts, his mission with Severus, the strange, brittle relationship he'd forged with Tom. Maybe it'll all drip away from his mind, drip by tiny drip, until he can sleep without nightmares, without memory, without recognition of what he had lost.

Chapter End Notes

This was an attempt at writing Severus' POV. Unsurprisingly, after 500k words (!!!) from Percy, this proved to be rather difficult. Please let me know how it went!

DECISIONS (1/3)

Chapter Notes

> Happy New Year! My resolution to myself was to finish this story in 2022, but like many of my resolutions, I did not quite make it to the deadline. Still, this is the final "chapter arc" before I will say goodbye to Percy, at least this version of him.
>
> I hope you continue to find this story interesting for these final three installments. Please drop me a comment either way! I made the mistake of looking up my story on Reddit and got a little discouraged at how many people recommended not to read it because Percy is so unlikable :(Percy is not very happy with what he sees in the mirror either.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: DECISIONS (1/3)

1998— (Percy is 22 & 35, Severus is 37, Harry is 18, and society is putting itself back together)

July 1998

One morning, Severus is sitting at the kitchen table when Percy drags himself downstairs for his customary cup of tea, a few minutes after eight.

Percy is so surprised to see the other man in the flesh that he misses the last step and nearly crashes through his doorway; without the aid of his magic, he is far clumsier than he used to be, and he would have fallen painfully to the floor if Severus had not come automatically to his aid, his charm lifting Percy and depositing him back to his feet.

“Thanks,” says Percy, which removes the pressure of deciding who would be the first to speak. His face burning, he hurries the rest of the way to the table and looks around desperately for Kreacher.

“I have dismissed him,” Severus says evenly. “Would you like a cup of tea? I can…prepare it for you.”

In theory, Percy could prepare *himself* a cup of tea; one of the items that Fred and George had sent him was a large Muggle kettle, the type that hung over a fire. Kreacher typically left the fire burning in the large, dusty fireplace throughout the day, so Percy could in theory retrieve the garish yellow tool from its box and set it up in the perpetual flames. In theory.

Percy wars between a *yes* and a *no*. Severus rolls his eyes and jabs his wand at the cupboard; a small mug floats out and fills itself with water, beginning to steam as it lands in front of

Percy. Another spell and a tea bag unfolds itself and drops with the barest splash into the boiling water.

Percy watches the magic hungrily. For much of the last few months, he's been able to pretend that he has not been…*inhibited*. Most of the objects in Grimmauld Place are magical, and the type of elf magic that Kreacher uses to cook and clean would anyway have been outside of Percy's reach, had he still been…*himself.* Bill and Charlie are careful to never do magic in front of Percy, and Draco too, and even Andromeda gives him the courtesy of Apparating outside his sight.

He should have expected that Severus not baby him with the same considerations. It burns, a little, to watch Severus' casual, graceful magic, but in a strange way, Percy is relieved to see the magic exert itself over the world and is upset when it ends.

"So it is true," Severus says. Percy snaps his gaze up and then recoils at the barely repressed anger that he can see simmering behind Severus' dark eyes. "So it is true that you have lost your magic."

"I made a vow," Percy says combatively. His brows draw together, and he finds himself straightening, ready for a fight. He does not know why Severus is furious at him, but the other wizard is plainly upset, and Percy's hackles are raised at once with the other man's sneering tone. "Or did you forget?"

"Yet it is possible to do a great many things without magic," Severus continues spitefully, ignoring this reference to Tom. Percy is both relieved and disappointed. "Make a cup of tea. Bathe regularly. Shave, if you dare use a Muggle razor."

Percy winces at each of these points, becoming uncomfortably aware that he has not bathed for several days. The last time that he'd risked a shower had been—Monday, three days prior. Kreacher had finally fixed the mirror in the bathroom that Percy used, clearly unable to bear the indignity of a guest showering in such squalid conditions (even a…Muggle guest, a Squib guest, a guest who would have once never been allowed inside Grimmauld), and Percy was unable to get the magic on the mirror to turn off. He'd spent most of the time instead in bed, emerging only for the intermittent cup of tea or slice of toast, the rigidity of the schedule that Kreacher had once imposed on him blown into the wind, like the white seeds of a dandelion after a particularly hefty gust.

Severus leans forward, and Percy cannot help but index the other man automatically, searching for visible injuries. Severus is thinner after three months in Azkaban, and his hair is as lanky as it had been during the worst of the Dark Lord's reign, but he is wearing new robes, oddly enough, and his fingernails look clean and trimmed. "One might even have assumed it was within your considerable physical ability to *pick up a quill and post a letter*."

Percy sits back heavily in his chair, his ears immediately burning with shame. Only now does he realise how carefully everyone else had tiptoed around him. Seeing Severus is like stepping outside of the draughty castle after a long day of classes; unsettling and surprising, but oddly welcoming, even as the light is blinding and harsh.

“I’m sorry,” Percy admits, the spark of his earlier fight withering and dying at the sight of Severus. For some reason, it is the oddity of Severus’ new robes that break Percy’s burgeoning anger. Severus had worn the same heavy robes throughout Percy’s time at Hogwarts and the three years of the quiet war they had lived through, so seeing Severus in something other than the coarse black fabric is surprising. These new robes are still black, of course, but they are cut in the new style, and they are made of finer material than the standard Hogwarts fare. Percy cannot imagine what impulse pushed Severus to buy new clothes after twenty years; perhaps his old robes were inaccessible to him at Hogwarts, or he could not bear to put them on, much how Percy had left his velvet and silk robes crumpled at the bottom of the armoire in Regulus' room. “I told them to not tell you about…the vow. I suppose I was embarrassed.”

“I suppose you were,” Severus bites out. Percy watches him ready himself for the next sentence, drawing himself up, and twisting his lips around the first word. Percy has seen him do that several times before, but rarely had he been the intended recipient. In the old days, when they had been teacher and student, or even…equals, Severus had often snapped at him, bitingly, and at times harshly, but Percy had never felt himself to be the recipient of Severus' cruelty. “But I do not believe mere embarrassment would be sufficient motivation for allowing me to *think you dead*.”

The words sting, as Percy had expected, even though he had been expecting a far harsher admonishment. What makes the words land so acutely, however, is how *openly* Severus wears his anger, gathered in the deep line between his eyebrows and inscribed within the crevices of his lined cheeks. Percy is accustomed to searching for meaning in the minute details of Severus’ expressions, like an explorer in a cave with only a weak Lumos for clarity, that to see his anger in such sharp relief strikes a deep pang in Percy’s chest and dries his mouth. “Severus, I…I did not wish for you to think me dead.”

Severus laughs nastily. “I must wish you congratulations, therefore, on a double victory of concealment. When we last spoke, I had believed us to be aligned, both on what was necessary, and what was likely to occur. I did not think it likely that you would go to your death so wantonly without discussing with me first, but I admit I did not think it likely you would allow me to believe you dead for so long as well. You have fooled me once before, but I would not have thought you capable of fooling me so capably again.”

Percy flushes and drops his eyes again to the table. He squeezes his fingers over his thumbs, trying to settle his erratic heartbeat. Percy knows that both he and Severus tend to resort to overly formal language when they are upset—Percy because Auntie Muriel had trained him to, showing him how the formal ways could protect him when his emotions threatened to overwhelm his logic, and Severus for reasons of his own—and these words, deliberately formed, are difficult to bear, particularly because they are true.

Percy had let Severus believe that they were aligned on their plan to defeat Tom, together, after the Dark Lord was dead, and he had not indicated to Severus his willingness to sacrifice himself if needed. And he had not written to Severus, not for months, even when he had known that Severus must have last seen him disappear into the silver dome of Tom’s magic. That McGonagall or Andromeda or Narcissa could have reported on his wellbeing is irrelevant; Percy should have owed Severus the truth, at the very least. “I understand why

you're upset at me," he mumbles to his fingers. "But you would have done the same, Severus. I did not plan to sacrifice myself, but I was willing to do so. Do not think I did not know you were planning for your own death, at the appropriate time."

This comment leaves them both in silence, unable to refute what each knows: they had each been prepared to die, perhaps each *wanting* to die, so that they may be the one whose task would be complete, and the other would receive the dubious gift of continued life. Percy cannot bear to meet Severus' gaze, so he looks around the kitchen instead, noting to his surprise that it looks far cleaner than he remembered it ever being, the various goblets and pots and decorations that Kreacher had so assiduously been cleaning all gleaming brightly. It's a wonder that Kreacher still has anything else to polish. Perhaps the elf has been inventing work to justify his continued presence in the kitchen with Percy. Pity, or wariness? Percy cannot understand why Kreacher would tolerate his presence in the Black ancestral house, let alone seek it out.

Severus' voice whips through the room, a breeze that lifts the small hairs on the back of Percy's neck. "What happened at the end?"

"I'm sorry?" Percy prevaricates, focusing instead on how the burnt copper of a large saucepan dangling over the stove reflects the flames of the fireplace. Kreacher never allows him in the kitchen when he is actively preparing meals, so Percy has a difficult time imagining the elf actually using any of these tools. He cannot imagine himself using them either, particularly without the aid of his magic. Will he have to learn? At some point Kreacher and Andromeda will tire of keeping here with his labour and her money.

"With Tom," says Severus, viciously, and Percy's attention is drawn to Severus despite his best efforts to continue looking away. But he's spared the intensity of Severus' anger; the other man is avoiding his gaze in return, focusing instead on the fireplace opposite the stove. The curve of his face is hidden partially by his long, limp hair. Though, Percy notices, Severus' hair looks less greasy than Percy had first assumed, and instead rather dry, as if Severus had taken to showering frequently without the proper conditioning charms. Given that Percy had barely been washing his own hair at all, he cannot say he is in any place to judge, but it adds to the strange image of this new Severus in Grimmauld Place, so familiar to him, and yet so oddly different, now that they are in peace. "You are sure he is dead?"

"Yes," Percy says shortly, though in truth it feels like a lie. Percy is not sure. He is not sure because he has assiduously not thought about what he did at the very end, reaching blindly for Tom's soul with an instinctive gesture, that awful candle hovering between them on a cloud of their shared assumptions. There is a small seed of fear, buried deep inside the soil of his stomach, that since he is still alive, so is Tom, though Harry had said otherwise.

But—he would *know*, wouldn't he, if Tom were still alive?

(But why had he survived, and Tom had not, if that were the case? Percy had known what he was trying to do. A *living* wish has no power save for fanciful imaginations. Perhaps Percy had failed to kill them both.)

Severus leans back, crossing his arms, and regarding Percy as if he were a recalcitrant student. "You do not know."

“Harry said he was dead.”

“If we had based our understanding of the war on what Potter claimed to know, we would be long defeated, and I would have been executed in Azkaban three days prior.”

Percy thinks back to the simmering conviction and insecurity in Harry’s clenched jaw and has to reluctantly agree. Percy can be the first to admit that he has never been quite sure what to think of their Chosen One; at times Harry had seemed to be growing along the same vein as Dumbledore, inscrutable and strangely powerful, and at other times he is very much a seventeen year old boy. Either way, Harry’s understanding of the war differs from Percy’s, though he could not say who had seen more clearly, at the end. “I don’t know, Severus,” Percy says, and the anger in his voice surprises them both. “I don’t know anything.”

Severus’ voice is quieter, and his face turns back to Percy, when he says, “You may tell me what happened with Tom, and then we will discuss how to proceed.”

Percy gathers his strength and settles it in the lines of his shoulders, like a robe cloaking his inner anguish. “I *killed* him,” he says, curling his tongue around the word to release it, harshly, into the world. “I used the Dementor’s stone…I brought him into my soul, and I killed him.”

“How?” Severus is relentless, and Percy curls into himself, unable to face the ferocity of Severus’ analytical curiosity. “What do you mean by saying that you *brought him into your soul?* In what domain lies this alleged soul realm, and in what way was Tom pulled into it? How did you kill him and remain alive yourself?”

“I…” Percy falters, unable to explain. He worries his lip and then plunges his hand into his robes, withdrawing the small stone that he still carries around with him, as childishly as if it were Ron’s old stuffed bear before Fred and George had turned it into a spider. He hesitates but then drops it into Severus’ palm. He cannot use it anymore. “I used this, as I have before. It helps you…see your soul. To walk within your soul, as it were. I sensed Tom. I cannot explain it any better than that, Severus. I do not know what it is I did. Perhaps you are right, and I did nothing, but Harry said that Tom….died.”

“He lost form? He reverted to the diadem? I have not heard that there was a body,” Severus says at once, holding out his palm stiffly, as if loath to bring the stone closer to his body. Both of their attention is drawn to the stone, which glimmers enigmatically in the firelight.

“*I don’t know, Severus,*” Percy hisses, his throat tightening around a repressed scream. “I don’t know anything anymore. It is not my concern any longer, but he must have died, because if he hadn’t died, I would still have my magic!”

(*I will do no more harm,* he thinks, like a vow, like a promise.)

This silences Severus, at least temporarily, and the wizard leans back, turning the stone meditatively over in his fingers. “We cannot assume that the Horcrux within the boy nor within Tom were defeated entirely, not without confirmation,” he muses quietly.

Percy very much wants to remain silent. As he had said, none of this is his concern any longer. He is a Muggle, or a Squib, or a broken wizard, and he ought not to be concerned with Tom, or magic, or souls, or the Boy Who Lived. But old habits die hard, even when Percy has been working with great care for the past three months to squash his old self entirely, and after several heartbeats of agonised silence, Percy opens his mouth and says reluctantly, "The Dementor I spoke to—he can tell us if the soul fragments are gone."

Severus raises an eyebrow. "The Dementor that gave you this stone?"

"He sensed the other Horcruxes; he sensed the one inside Harry and even the one inside the Grimmauld Place wards," Percy says defensively. "I told him nothing and he returned to me with the truth."

"And you can summon this Dementor?"

Percy frowns as he considers this. "Well, no," he says slowly, though the Dementor had said that he had learned to recognise his soul, that he would be there at his death, that he had promised to collect Percy's soul personally. Percy wonders if he had been close enough to death at the time to draw the Dementor nearer.

"Can any Dementor tell us?"

"This Dementor knows what Tom's soul felt like," Percy says distantly, still thinking. Perhaps this is why he has remained alive; perhaps to summon the Dementor he will have to die, and in his final moments the Dementor will confirm the truth for him…

A second later, he straightens and yelps; Severus has sent a small Stinging charm to his upper arm, which hurts all the same on a Muggle than it would on a wizard.

"We will work together to summon the Dementor," orders Severus, roughly. "I will return tomorrow and we will begin. You will *not* take any action without me present, is that understood?"

Percy eyes Severus resentfully but does not object. He supposes now that Severus is the only wizard in the room, Percy has to defer to him, but it does not rankle any less. Severus watches him for a prolonged second and then stands, the chair screeching loudly against the floor. He sets the stone gingerly back on the table and then banishes their mugs to the sink for Kreacher to clean later. Percy sits mutely as Severus nods at him and then turns to go, striding toward the door with his characteristic billow, even with the new cut of robes adorning his tall figure.

"I didn't know," Percy says suddenly, as Severus begins to step through the doorway. Severus pauses but does not turn, the long line of his leg remaining at an angle, half of his body already over the threshold. "I did not know that you thought me dead. I am sorry for the… confusion that might have caused." At the very last second, he does not say *pain*. He does not know if it would have pained Severus to think it dead, but it certainly would have confused him.

Severus does not give any indication that he had heard or registered Percy's words, continuing his stride as if the pause had never existed. But he returns the next day, thirty minutes earlier, so that he arrives in the midst of Percy attempting to finish a lacklustre breakfast of toast and jam.

Severus eyes Percy's meal without apology and then turns a withering glare on Kreacher, who cowers behind the stack of wood he had been transporting to replenish the fireplace for the day. It does not make Percy feel any better to know that Kreacher had been as taken aback by Severus' arrival than he had.

"Tomorrow, you will serve him either oatmeal or eggs," orders Severus. "A half portion if you must. Put him on a course of nourishment potions; I will provide the dosage tomorrow."

"I'm not a *child,*" says Percy grumpily. He was not particularly fond of toast, either; the first time that Kreacher had served it for him, his stomach had dropped away from him, and he'd remembered that last morning, the smell of bread—

—but his stomach feels feeble, and he rarely feels hungry, so it is usually all that he can do to force down the toast under Kreacher's eager gaze.

"Alas, I continue to have a vested interest in your continued survival, and so I will not allow you to waste away merely because you have lost your appetite. Your body will need the fuel to heal."

Percy opens his mouth instinctively to protest, but then he notices again that Severus has taken pains with his appearance, that part of him had felt it necessary to prepare to visit Percy, and then he finds himself saying instead, "Fine."

They go outside into the yard, which is still warded, but not as fiercely, which Severus says may help them in the unlikely scenario that they actually summon the Dementor on their first try.

"Try and access the stone as you normally do," Severus says, positioning himself just opposite Percy, so that his body partially blocks the summer sun from Percy's face. After so many days inside, Percy feels immediately warm, perspiring in his trousers and long-sleeved shirt, but he does not want to ask Severus for a Cooling charm and so merely endures it silently.

"I won't be able to—"

"—just *try*," Severus interrupts tiredly.

Percy snaps his mouth shut again, a gesture he is rapidly becoming used to in Severus' presence. He does not know why they feel so awkward around each other; he does not know whether it is Tom that looms large in the space between them, or their joint readiness to sacrifice themselves, or the three months without contact, or Percy's lack of magic, or merely this strange world that they have emerged into so suddenly after years of fighting, a world of peace yet a world so alien that neither know how to behave.

Percy feels embarrassed as he holds the stone in his palm, avoiding Severus' gaze. It isn't going to work; he is not even able to access his mental shields, so he does not know why Severus thinks he will be able to *see into his soul*. And after killing Tom—his third murder—who's to say he even has a soul to peer into? Perhaps he blew it away with the rest of him when he looked at Tom and wished for—

"Percy," says Severus, firmly, but strangely kindly, and Percy feels his cheeks flame. He so rarely hears his given name from Severus' lips that it always feels oddly intimate. "Just try."

He takes a deep breath and looks cautiously at the stone. At first, he sees nothing; the stone looks like a pebble, grey and unassuming. As he stares at it for longer, self-consciously trying to ignore Severus' sharp gaze, he begins to see some of the old qualities that had reminded him of the Philosopher's Stone: the glinting edges to the stone, the soft ripple of the underside, the faint haziness inside, like the early morning mists that used to curl around his feet as he walked to work past the Muggle park, the streetlamps still casting their yellow light…

But he does not see Hogwarts, even as he turns his mind hesitantly to the mist that had curled around Gryffindor tower in the morning, obscuring their vision of the Quidditch pitch below and the gleam of the Great Lake. Perhaps he cannot recall Hogwarts with the sharp clarity required to meld his mind with the stone, to enter the soul realm, as Severus had called it. Perhaps he does not have the magic to make it work.

"I can't do it," he says shortly, angrily, thrusting the stone back toward Severus.

Severus ignores the stone and focuses on Percy. Percy half expects to see a scroll hovering in the air and a Quick Quotes quill taking notes. "How did you used to speak to the Dementor? With words? In your mind? In the soul realm?"

"I heard him—it—in my mind," Percy says reluctantly. "But I spoke out loud, with my words."

Severus purses his lips and hums thoughtfully. Percy is…heartened to see the familiar academic, interested look replace Severus' earlier intensity, and he brings his hand slowly back to his side, fingers curled around the stone. "Perhaps try speaking out loud, and then your mind. Hold an image of the soul realm in your head as best you can, or try thinking of the Dementor."

Percy obediently tries all combinations of the above: speaking out loud while he forces himself to think of the dark Hogwarts of his memories, thinking fiercely in his mind while he remembers the Dementor floating in front of him, and everything in between. Both he and Severus wait with anticipation, eager though they ought to know that this has but a slim chance of success, but of course no Dementor swoops into Number Twelve.

"We will continue," Severus concludes finally at the end of an hour. "There are many unknown variables. We may need to leave the wards entirely, for instance. We may also try to speak to a different Dementor, who may be able to at least identify whether Potter is free of the Horcrux."

Percy nods silently. He is not able to verbalise—and does not even try, even to himself—what it had felt like for a fleeting second to feel like a wizard again, to feel like he was on the verge of doing magic, to feel like he was exerting his power on the world and having the world respond to him in return.

The jagged spike of the shattered hope stays with him through the next day, and the next, as Severus returns and forces Percy into a series of experiments designed to contact the Dementor. Severus does not offer to try the stone himself, and Percy does not suggest it. He does not know why; Severus is the wizard, and Percy cannot help but think that magic must be a prerequisite to accessing one's soul, even though a small voice in his head points out that hadn't he decided at the very end that they were different things entirely? But Severus refuses to even touch the stone, after Percy had first slid it into his palm, and Percy returns to carrying it in his pocket.

Kreacher begins to serve him better meals, pointedly, and timed to coincide with Severus' visits, so that Severus may see that Percy is being lavishly cared for, or something like that. Percy submits to this silently. His appetite does not return, but Severus seems to be pleased by his efforts.

"Why does nobody visit you?" Severus asks, toward the end of their first week battling this pointless task. Percy had been contemplating with some disgust the congealed scrambled egg that Kreacher had left on the toasted bread. The day before, Percy had been entirely unable to consume the slimy fried egg that Kreacher had prepared, but this permutation seems infinitely worse, for some reason. He uses his fork to poke tentatively at the egg and wrinkles his nose at the soft yellow jiggle. Percy had eaten this breakfast several times a week at Hogwarts, and even during his time at the Ministry, but he'd never noticed how *strong* the smell of egg was, how it mixed so oddly with the brittle texture of the toast. He almost prefers the nourishment potions, though they are thick and slimy and taste like dark clay.

"People visit me."

Severus snaps his fingers and a breeze of pepper coats the egg, followed by a sprinkle of white cheese. Percy rolls his eyes and takes the hint, cutting a small sliver of the toast with his fork and knife. "I would expect your entire family to be lined up at the door, begging for your forgiveness."

Percy snorts and chews his food with some ferocity. "I think they perhaps think I should be doing the same to them."

Severus allows him to finish his meal in silence, but as they make their way to the outside yard, he stops and says curiously, "They believe that you owe them your…apologies?"

Percy motions with an unimpressed gesture toward the Mark that still mars his arm, though it is concealed by his shirt sleeve. "Death Eater, remember? Or are people falling over themselves to welcome *you* back into society?"

Severus' face spasms in some private gesture of half-disgusted amusement. Percy can read between the lines. If Severus had anywhere else to be, he would not be here with Percy, day

after day. It is one reason that Percy has not ended these little sessions, though he knows they do not have any hope of succeeding. “They do not know of the role that you played?”

It is an interesting question, and one that Percy gives genuine thought, as he stands opposite of Severus and allows the man’s height to block the sun from blinding him. “I don’t know,” he says slowly, thoughtfully. “I told McGonagall and Harry about…your role in it, or at least, your role in Dumbledore’s death.”

“Ah.” Severus shifts lightly on his feet. “Scrimgeour told me I had a small but vocal party of supporters.”

“Just me, I’m afraid,” Percy says with a small, embarrassed laugh. “Though I did not speak to Scrimgeour. I merely pointed McGonagall in the direction of Dumbledore’s portrait, who presumably did the rest. I…mentioned some of my role in the proceedings…but I did not go into detail.”

“But—” Severus begins and then visibly pulls himself short.

“But?” Percy queries, frowning at Severus.

Severus waves his question aside. “But your family ought to know by now that you were a spy.”

Percy continues to frown, some of his old instincts alerting him that perhaps Severus had meant to say something else. “I don’t know what they know. None of them have asked me directly, so I imagine they’ve come to their own conclusion.”

“Does that not…bother you?”

Percy scowls at Severus. The question is no more welcome from Severus than it had been from Draco, even if both had asked it in the same artless way. But to Severus, he says, “Of course it bothers me. But I’m not going to tell them what happened just because they’re too afraid or stubborn to ask, and the moment I open my mouth, Harry will come marching in and tell everyone I loved the Dark Lord, or something to that effect, and it’ll all backfire on me anyway.”

“I see,” Severus says, as he had once before. He regards Percy thoughtfully and then he walks over to the rusted gate to the outside world, wrenching it open physically instead of using a charm. “Let us walk. I do not think we will have much luck inside the Black family wards.”

Percy eyes Severus suspiciously but follows silently. Grimmauld Place is in a part of London of which Percy is not particularly familiar, but Severus seems to know where to walk, and leads them confidently and quietly down a series of twisting streets, some covered with cobblestones, and others housing a collection of loud Muggle automobiles jockeying for space.

Percy has not walked in many days, months even, and he finds himself rapidly out of breath as they leave behind the grim fence-lined houses of Grimmauld Place. But he only steels himself and says nothing; he will not admit weakness, not to Severus, not over something as

pedestrian as *walking*. Nevertheless, he is cautiously relieved when Severus leads them off the busy street to a small wood-lined park. More than a park, Percy realises, as they walk through the iron gates and seem to leave all of the noises of the city behind.

“There are a few such nature reserves in London proper,” Severus explains, perhaps catching Percy’s quizzical look aimed at his back, though Percy is lagging behind by several steps. “I saw this one on a map when I was surveying the neighbourhood.”

They take their seats, slightly self-consciously, on a wooden bench a few metres inside the reserve. Percy tips his head back and looks at the verdant canopy of green, marvelling as a bird darts between the trees, a quick black flash of a wing preceding its persistent warble. He is more used to soft green hills and the austere Hogwarts landscape, rather than this surprisingly lush greenery, and he finds himself relaxing, just slightly in the shoulders and back.

“Why would Potter have cause to say you loved the Dark Lord?”

The serenity of the moment is immediately shattered. Percy tenses throughout his body, staring fixedly in front of him to avoid having to look at Severus. “The Trio would have been surprised to see me in Tom’s presence and to speak to him with such familiarity."

“*Love*,” says Severus thoughtfully. Percy flinches violently at the word. “You believed you loved the Dark Lord?”

“I was joking. Being facetious.” Percy’s words are clipped and angry. “You’ve not seen Harry recently, Severus. He was insisting all of the Death Eaters be put to death. He is likely to take any hint of sympathy and twist it to its extreme.”

“Do not try to distract me,” Severus interrupts acerbically. “You did not love Tom.”

“I did not say that I did.”

“Tom captivated lesser wizards—”

“*Shut up*, Severus,” bites Percy, the force of his anger swelling and silencing them both. He squeezes the wooden bench so tightly that he feels the sharp sting of a splinter entering his palm. “I do not wish to speak to you about this.”

“You will need to speak of it to someone.” Severus sounds somehow *pitying*. Of all of the responses from Severus, this one is the least palatable for Percy to bear, and he pushes himself onto his feet, ignoring the small drop of blood welling from his puncture wound.

“Just leave me alone, *please,*” Percy spits out, jamming his hands into the pockets of his trousers. He feels the small grey stone and squeezes it tightly, to ground himself. “I know that you’re just here to…to keep me company, or because you feel bad that my family doesn’t visit me. I don’t need your pity, Severus. We’ve killed the Dark Lord together. I appreciate your support in that mission, but we aren’t—we aren’t *friends*. You don’t owe me anything.”

When Percy peeks back, anxiously, he sees that Severus' face has blackened, like the sky minutes before a thunderstorm unleashes its fury on the ground. Percy is both relieved and saddened by Severus' anger, and he bears it stoically, knowing that what he has said will be better for them both to hear earlier rather than later.

"Fine," says Severus, shaking his head. "Waste away by yourself, if you must. I did not think you were too weak to bear what must come after a victory."

"Now you do," snaps Percy, who turns on his heel and storms away. He realises almost immediately that to do so is a mistake, and perhaps part of him thinks that Severus will go after him. He makes it out of the park, however, without anyone following him, and down an adjacent street, and suddenly Percy is in Muggle London completely alone, without magic, and without a map.

Percy had not paid very good attention to where Severus had taken them; he had been overwhelmed by the clamour of the city streets after three months in nearly perfect solitude. Even now, he shrinks into himself as a black car roars past him, honking angrily. Wide-eyed, he looks around him, but he does not recognise anything.

Just go back to Severus, a small voice whispers in his ear, but he squashes it furiously. He can still hear Severus' voice, condescending and absolute: *you did not love Tom*.

Hadn't he?

Percy chooses a direction at random and begins walking, knowing that to take himself further from familiar surroundings is nothing more than folly, but unable to stay in one place with that thought lingering in his mind. He has not thought of Tom. He has *purposefully* not thought of Tom, even though every damned slice of toast reminds him abstractly of Tom, and seeing Severus reminds him of Tom, and the silver goblets that Kreacher has been polishing reminds him of Tom, and the newspaper clippings hung up in Regulus' room, and the leather chair in the downstairs study, and everything in between. He moves his mind carefully, deliberately away from Tom every time he thinks of Tom's glinting eyes and scorching smirk, of his long limbs and easy grace, of the cold bite of his magic.

You did not love Tom.

"I did," he whispers to himself. It is so horrendous, so shameful, that even Severus cannot believe it of him. But what value is there in lying to himself? He did love Tom. His stomach flipped uncomfortably every time Tom smiled at him, and he thought sometimes longingly of what a life with Tom would have looked like, and he enjoyed Tom's company, and he tried to impress him, and he understood Tom, better than he understood himself. Every gesture of Tom's was familiar to him. Every expression seemed inevitable on Tom's face. Sometimes, Percy would read a passage in a book or hear one of his colleagues say something and hear Tom's response echo through his mind before he formulated his own thoughts, even after the diary was forever destroyed. Was that not love, the preoccupation with Tom's whereabouts, the fondness he had despite Tom's cruelty, the desire to improve himself so he shone better in Tom's eyes?

He'd offered to help Tom *heal*. He'd stood there in his own soul, with Harry and Ron and Ginny and Hermione outside, and offered to help Tom instead of killing him. He'd kissed Tom, at the very end, with what he'd thought were his dying moments. Was that not love, the belief that Tom was somehow still redeemable, the fact that his thoughts lingered on Tom at the very end of his life, rather than his family?

He'd kissed Tom, and at the very end, he'd wished that—

Percy hears the whistle of a train, and as he looks up, he realises that his feet have somehow improbably carried him to King's Cross, but the Muggle part of it. Usually the wizards arrived in a different section and walked swiftly to the magical platform, so Percy has never seen this view of it, its imposing entrance, its surprisingly graceful arches. Inside, it is a whir of noise and colour, of Muggles dragging trolleys and purchasing food, of trains wheeling in and out. Dazed, he finds a seat on an open bench and sits there, staring out him in surprise.

He hadn't known there were quite so many *Muggles*. There are dozens of Muggles, perhaps hundreds, of every conceivable look. There are Muggles carrying trunks that look like they are out of a Hogwarts dorm, and Muggles with luggage that Percy has never seen before. And the noise! Some sort of…Muggle amplification charm makes announcements at regular intervals, and there are large posters like the pages of the Daily Prophet, except much brighter.

None of the Muggles give him a second look. Percy has not been intentionally dressing like a Muggle, but he has been reluctant to wear robes, and so he supposes that his plain shirt and trousers fit in quite well. He'd always thought Muggles had outrageous fashion, and certainly some of what they are wearing looks rather odd, but most of them are dressed normally, if casually.

And, on one wall, is a large map. Percy wars with himself for a few minutes and then stands. He recognises it from the map he'd once used to track…Tom's life, and his own by proxy, and there is a large red dot helpfully proclaiming their current location. Percy stares at it until his eyes begin to water, as if it will show him his footsteps, and Tom's too, some silent explanation of how he had ended up here, bereft and alone.

But the map is still and inert, of course, as Percy is now. Most likely the Marauders Map would no longer show Percy. Does the registry still track his whereabouts, would there still be a trace on his wand, or had the magical world forgotten about him entirely?

Percy reaches out and lays his hand on the red dot. The last time he had been at King's Cross, he had stepped off the train as a Hogwarts Graduate, so idiotically, arrogantly assured that his wild, careening plan would result in success. Forget redoing the last eleven years of his life; if Percy had a Time Turner now, he would have gone straight to Dumbledore with the diary, fallen to his knees and asked for help. Was that not love, to wish desperately that he did not know what he had now lost, to have such a weighty loss live inside his chest til the end of his days?

He searches around the station until he sees a small nature reserve lettered on the map. From there, he uses his finger to trace widening circles until he spots it, in tiny letters: *Grimmauld Place*. So the Black family house is quite close to the station, which he supposes makes

sense. Fascinated, despite himself, Percy looks for the few other landmarks he knows: *Whitehall* is the Muggle name for the entrance to the Ministry of Magic, which seems rather far away, and *Charing Cross* is the road where the Leaky Cauldron sits. That would mean that Diagon Alley is not too far from where he is now. So strange, to have the Wizarding World imprinted on top of the Muggle maze of streets and parks, each so oblivious of the other. Percy had never considered the physical relationship of these areas to each other. London was London—the only time that wizards ever physically traversed through space was with the Hogwarts Express, an anachronism from the days where Floos were scarce and Portkeys dangerous and unreliable.

“Do you need a map, son?” An older woman asks him kindly. He starts and turns to her, his ears reddening automatically. He must look incredibly lost for her to ask him that.

“Just trying to orient myself,” he explains hastily. “I’ve not…I’ve not been to this part of London before.”

She hands him a map made out of an odd material, very slippery, and folded multiple times. “I’m headed home, finally,” she says with a conspiratorial wink. “My husband was supposed to pick me up tomorrow, but I thought to myself, why not try the train? Surprisingly easy to navigate, really. Picked up this map but I hardly used it. You’re welcome to it now; I was just about to bin it."

“I see,” Percy says weakly, not sure how to respond. “Er, thank you.”

“Good luck,” she says warmly, giving him a smile as she turns away, lugging a large trunk behind her by hand, though to Percy's eyes it looks rather heavy. Wary that she may turn and see his stare, he examines his unexpected gift and, after only a minor struggle, manages to unfold it so that it matches the map on the wall.

It only takes him two hours to find his way home, at which point Kreacher is nearly out of his mind with worry. He insists on feeding Percy a large midday meal. To both of their surprise, he actually eats most of it.

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Percy had thought, perhaps guiltily, that he may never see Severus again; certainly it would have taken *him* many days to work up the courage or goodwill to return, if Severus had snapped at him in such a way. Only three days later, however, Severus returns to Grimmauld Place, but with an unexpected visitor: Tonks.

Percy only catches a glimpse of Severus’ glowering face in his bedroom door before he is replaced by Tonks, who gives Percy a tentative smile. Though Percy has not seen her since the Final Duel, he automatically relaxes at the sight of her, though he flushes a second later as he realises his precarious position: swaddled beneath a large down comforter, in his pyjamas, and without a shirt. After the first two days without Severus, Percy had relaxed his adherence

to the breakfast schedule that Kreacher tried unsuccessfully to still impose on him, though Percy did continue to take his nutrient potions.

“He said we are leaving in thirty minutes, and I am to rouse you,” Tonks says, perhaps unconsciously mimicking Severus’ formal cadence. She winks at him with some of her characteristic good humour. “Does Snape regularly rouse you from bed, then?”

Percy blushes more deeply, pulling the comforter up to cover his chest. “What are you doing here?”

“I was hoping you would tell me, to be honest,” Tonks says, walking into the room and shutting the door carefully beside her. She takes the seat at Regulus’ desk and picks up one of the photos on his desk, looking at it with interest. “Kreacher told Mum and I the whole story of Regulus, did she tell you? Auntie Black wanted to burn Regulus off the wall, and Mum got furious at her. She’s trying to figure out how to add me to it now, so it has all of the Blacks.”

Percy still does not know the entire story of Regulus, as Tonks had put it; he hadn’t thought to ask Kreacher, though they’ve been sitting silently next to each other for several hours each day. He starts to ask Tonks now, but then he changes his plan midway through the words leaving his mouth, asking instead, “What did he—well, so you're saying Severus didn't tell you what he wanted from you?"

Tonks gives a small shrug, crossing and uncrossing her legs. Percy feels strange essentially lying prone as Tonks sits upright, but he would feel far more awkward having Tonks see him half-naked, particularly with the ugly stain of his Dark Mark on his left arm, and so he remains only partially propped up by his pillows. “Snape sent me a letter, asking me yesterday if I was free today to help you both complete an errand. I was shocked to receive it, to be honest, but Mum forced me to say yes.”

“Well, I had nothing to do with it,” Percy says defensively. “You can leave if you’re busy.”

Tonks sets the silver frame gingerly back on the desk and turns to scowl at Percy. “I’m not busy, you twat. I was just surprised to see a letter from Snape. Mum told me that it must be important, if it involves you two.”

Percy does not know how quite to respond to that. It is the kind of thing he would have agreed with, *before*. “I didn’t expect to see him here, to be honest,” he admits. “The last time he visited…I shouted at him and told him to go away.”

When he looks at Tonks, he sees that she’s smiling. “Classic Percy,” she says, her hair lightening marginally. “Mum says you barely speak to her either.”

Percy rolls his eyes. “I don’t have anything to say to anyone. I don’t know why everyone continues to bother.”

“Well, that makes me feel better about not having the courage to come and see you,” Tonks says, and though her tone is joking, there is an intensity in it that makes Percy’s mouth suddenly dry. She leans forward, her eyes seeking his, and says deliberately, “Percy, I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Percy says, hesitantly. His hands bunch in the comforter, and he pulls it even closer to his chin, as if to hide the rest of him too. There had been a time where Tonks had been one of the easiest people for Percy to talk to, and he wonders whether she has come here to tell him that she wishes for their relationship to end, formally. He wouldn't blame her, but he would have preferred a letter.

“I’m sorry,” repeats Tonks. Her hair tinges blue as she says earnestly, “I’m sorry I didn’t come earlier. I just…I couldn’t handle it. I’m really sorry, Perce.”

“I understand,” Percy says dryly. He has to let go of one hand in the comforter to motion to himself, to the still, inert nature of his being. “I can barely handle it myself.”

Tonks shakes her head, agitated. “Not your *magic*, Perce. Merlin’s beard, my grandparents are Muggles. It’s just…”

Percy raises an eyebrow. Surely Tonks doesn’t still think he’s a Dark Wizard? “I’ve been pardoned, you know.”

“You were trying to *die*, Percy,” bursts out Tonks, her chest heaving. Then the words begin to tumble over themselves, as if eager to escape. “I went to your flat; you kept me keyed into your wards, which was stupid, Perce; I boxed up your things for you. I figured you wouldn’t want to go back. And then I found…something.”

Tom’s portrait, or the frame of it, shoved into the back of Percy’s closet with Arthur’s canvas. But would Tonks be able to recognise what that had been? Maybe she had seen the life ward and felt the residual Dark magic on it, or perhaps she’d just seen his questionable collection of books. Or had she seen the plate with the half-eaten toast, the dark sludge of undrinkable coffee, and somehow surmised what had occurred, that last morning of Percy’s life?

“I saw the letter,” Tonks says weakly, and her hair reverts to the dark brown that Percy sees most often on Andromeda. “I read it. Your letter to Snape. I’m sorry, Percy, I know I shouldn’t have.”

Percy frowns at her, quizzically, and then the bottom of his stomach lurches and drops away, as if he’d fallen off a cliff, and he could not even bother scrabbling in the air for purchase. Percy had assumed that letter would wither away and disappear without anyone ever seeing it. To know that Tonks had read it, that she’d seen his reference to Tom…Percy stares at her, horrified, the comforter falling from his grip, though he barely notices.

“I gave it to Snape,” admits Tonks miserably. “Or I told Mum to give it to him. I’m the reason he thought you were dead…I didn’t think…I just thought that he should see it…”

Severus had read the letter too? Percy raises his head, betrayed, and Tonks flinches away from the anguish that must be so clearly written across his face. “I was *still alive,* Tonks!” Percy cries. “I may not have my magic, but I still have my *dignity*.”

“Snape was going to kill himself!” Tonks says, her face twisted in remorse. “Mum said he’d refused to give testimony…and I thought that if he read your letter, he might change his mind.”

That made…certain things more clear. Aside from their argument, Severus had been treating him very kindly of late, chiding him into eating, keeping him company, and humouring him with his talk of soul magic. Severus must have been doing that all because Percy's asinine, emotional letter probably had been the loudest and most childish cry for help that Severus had ever encountered from him.

Merlin's beard, no wonder Severus sometimes looked at him with pity in his eyes, no wonder Severus had wanted to talk about Tom!

Percy searches for something to say, but all he can muster is, "But you still didn't come to see me, even before you gave the letter to Severus."

Tonks pauses, holding herself tightly in the air, her hand curled instinctively around her wand. Her eyes search for something in Percy's face, and he stares back defiantly, unwilling to let her off easy. "I read the letter," she says again, but softer, her voice like falling snow. "Percy, you said you were ready to die."

"I—"

"And you sat there, in the kitchen of this damned house, and all you said was that you needed me to clean up the mess. You knew you might never see me again, Percy, and you said *nothing*. Where was my goodbye letter? Why didn't you *talk* to me? I would have thought—" Tonks' voice breaks, and to Percy's horror, he sees his toughest friend begin to tear up.

But Percy has nothing to say. He had sat in his room and coldly evaluated that he was ready to die, that he was content with having seen Tonks for the last time, that he was prepared to end his life without saying any additional goodbyes.

And he had been. He had not felt any residual regret, nor guilt, as he downed his final Dreamless Sleep potion and drifted off to sleep. But Percy had not considered that there may have been some people who were not ready to say goodbye to *him*. It is an odd thought.

"I didn't think you would care," Percy says weakly, which is evidently the wrong thing to say, for a second later Tonks launches herself at him. The comforter crinkles beneath her weight as she swallows him in a hug, and even the awkwardness of his bare skin touching her robes cannot detract from the strange honey warmth that seems to drip slowly over Percy at the contact. Only now does he realise that Tonks may be the first person to touch him since he'd lost his magic.

He finds to his surprise that there are tears on his face, but he cannot say whether they are from Tonks, who is openly crying now, or from himself.

Several minutes later, Tonks is sitting next to him on the bed, and the comforter is discarded beside him, covering only his sparkling red and gold pyjama pants, one of the gifts that Fred and George had mailed to him to liven up his environment.

"Remus essentially did the same thing to me," Tonks is in the middle of explaining with a strange, defiant sadness. "He didn't even have the courage to say goodbye, even though he

knew he was going off on a suicidal mission. If the Dark Lord had survived for another week, I'm positive he would have died."

Percy is quiet. Now that Tonks has pointed it out, he can see the similarities in the pain that he'd accidentally inflicted on her, and the hurt that Remus had left in his wake. If he felt like speaking, he might have pointed out that he was trying to defeat the most evil wizard of their time, and Remus was seeking an outlet for his frustration at being boxed out of the war, but he does not want to disrupt the fragile peace that once again ties he and Tonks together, and he isn't really being fair to Remus. Percy is an older man, now; he has to stop these childish grumblings, even if they are in the privacy of his own head.

"He's coming around the place with flowers; Mum cursed him the last time he dropped by after dark and told him that I could jolly well approach *him* when I was ready," Tonks continues. Percy has to snort at this. Andromeda has never been Remus' greatest fan, and Percy can imagine her look of disdain at whatever shop flowers Remus would be able to dredge up, likely without any consideration of the traditional meanings of the arrangement. Percy certainly would never dare to give Tonks flowers, not if he knew Andromeda would be scrutinising the effort. "I don't feel ready to talk to him. I barely felt ready to see you, and I only came because Snape bullied me into it. I don't know what's wrong with me, Perce. I barely even saw any of the battle, but I just feel so…tired."

"Nothing's wrong with you," Percy says quietly. "It isn't about seeing battle; trust me. It's been a difficult series of years."

"You were in the thick of it from the beginning," Tonks says, waving a dismissive hand that nearly smacks Percy in the face.

"I really wasn't," says Percy, honestly. In his first life, he'd seen all but an hour of battle, and that hour had been enough to send his life spiralling into combustion. "And Tonks, you shouldn't sell yourself short. It's not about flashy battles; it's about slow, deliberate work, honest work, and you did more of that than anyone else in the Order."

"Except for Moody or Scrimgeour," Tonks says thickly, but she seems to derive a small measure of comfort from his words. It reminds him, oddly enough, of sitting next to Charlie, their toes dangling in the lake, and his brother's halting confession. Percy has never been good at providing comfort, so it always takes him by surprise to be in the position to try. "I don't really want to see him. Remus is a good man, but he's…he has a lot of demons to fight, and I don't know if I can handle being his partner through it all. I'll be his friend and be there for him as needed, but…I suppose in some way, he feels that his burdens ought to take precedence over mine, given that he has so many, and his are all so…heavy."

"That's ridiculous," Percy says at once. "I mean, his burdens are heavy, but it's not a *game*, or a competition. He's had nearly twenty years to get over the death of his friends, and Sirius' death undoubtedly was difficult for you too. He shouldn't be asking more from you than you're willing to give, not when you're both hurting."

Whatever Tonks may have said in response withers and dies, as Severus stalks back into the room, looking harried and impatient, clearly rattled. "I did not realise Madam Black's portrait

still hung on the wall," he says in response to Percy's quizzical look, before he could come to his senses and avoid making eye contact.

Tonks winces. "Mum and I tried, but her bloody portrait is fused onto the wall somehow. We did our best to pull it off."

Severus' voice is dark and dangerous, promising future harm. "Well, it seems that I was the unlucky person to inform Madam Blacks that the war is over."

Tonks and Percy accidentally catch each other's eyes, and Percy has to work to conceal a smile. Even merely having Tonks present seems to brighten up the room; Severus' ire becomes rather more funny than painful to observe through their shared lens.

"Where are we headed, Professor?" Tonks asks, the hint of a smile still on her lips.

Severus' face darkens further, and he intentionally avoids looking at Percy. "Azkaban. Mr. Weasley and I need to speak to a Dementor, and I understand that most of the Dementors have left the Ministry's control."

"What?" Percy interjects, more out of surprise at the latter piece of news than the former. He is not surprised that Severus has decided on Azkaban as the easiest place to find a Dementor, though Percy would have expected there to be at least a few within the Ministry itself, for security, or leftover from the Dark Lord's orders. "What do you mean, they've left the Ministry's control?"

Tonks shakes her head. "It was the damndest thing, Perce. Soon after it was reported that Voldemort was dead, most of them abandoned their posts. It makes Moody nervous; he's convinced they're trying to raise him back from the dead, or something like that."

"Definitely not," protests Percy. He can see what must have happened; there could have been dozens of Dementors that had been inadvertently freed, either by the Dark Lord's orders or the Ministry's, and merely waiting for their opportunity to leave without censure. "The Dementors are gathering…many of them have gone East, I think. They are trying to figure out how to break their vow."

Both Severus and Tonks have matching expressions of surprise and confusion, making Percy falter. Slightly embarrassed, he continues weakly, "They're bound to the Ministry…bound to obey the Ministry's instructions. Every time they prematurely…kill someone, they're able to use the magic to break their individual vow. I would think that over the last year, they've had quite a lot of opportunities to do so. It wouldn't surprise me to know that many of them were freed but waiting for the right time to leave."

"How do you *know* that?"

Percy looks down at his legs, unable to even begin to explain to Tonks why or how he had befriended a Dementor. Severus, luckily, comes to his rescue with a sharp, impatient snap. "Get dressed, Mr. Weasley, unless you were planning on baring your chest to the rest of Azkaban in addition to Miss Tonks."

Tonks and Severus mercifully step out of the room to give him privacy, though Tonks does not leave without sending him a sly, mocking look for company. Percy scrambles for clothes, picking yesterday's trousers up from the floor and shrugging on his wizarding robes at the last minute, for warmth, or perhaps for disguise. Luckily, neither party mentions his presumption when he steps out of the room to find them both silently regarding their separate sides of the hallway.

"Can you be Apparated?" Tonks asks curiously.

Percy wants to flinch, or wince, or otherwise deflect the sharp sting that accompanies her words, but her face is open and curious, and so he avoids Severus' glance and replies only, "Yes, I believe so. Your mother brought me here by Apparation from hospital."

"I reckon you're more like a Squib," Tonks muses as they make their way downstairs and into the parlour where the Apparation point is. "I've been doing some research on vows for you, dear Percival. Did you know that there hasn't been anyone who's broken a magical vow in the last six decades at least?"

"Because they're not stupid enough to make a magical vow, probably," Percy mutters, though Tonks bestows upon him an unhappy look and he subsides. "Thank you for researching it, though."

"Well, I'm not done researching it. I mean, clearly you've not lost your entire magical core, given that you haven't been repelled by the charms outside Grimmauld Place."

Percy considers this as Tonks offers her arm for Side-Along. He hadn't considered the effect of Muggle Repelling charms. Would he be able to even see the Dementors? Some of the twist in his stomach unwinds as the academic part of his brain takes hold of the problem. Tom would have found it interesting too; Percy can still remember their discussion on Unbreakable Vows, about whether a stronger soul would—

—with a sickening lurch, Tonks pulls them away, and Percy experiences the most nauseating thirty seconds of his life, far worse than when Andromeda had brought him to Grimmauld Place. When he arrives at Azkaban, he falls to his knees and begins retching, feeling trembling and ill.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Perce," he faintly hears above him. "My Side Along is rubbish; I should have let Snape take you."

"An imprecise turn of the heel, Miss Tonks," Severus replies. Their voices echo oddly above him, and Percy sits back on his heels weakly, his stomach still rolling uncomfortably inside his body.

Slowly, Tonks swims into focus. She is biting her lip, looking concerned, her pale white face a stark contrast to Severus' fierce glower, aimed more at Tonks than at Percy, though nevertheless upsetting to behold. Percy focuses on Severus' voice as the wizard precisely details all of the flaws in Tonks' Apparation, which helps him fight the urge to throw up again. Slowly, he pushes himself to his feet, ignoring Tonks' eager hand.

“Oh, let me,” Tonks says abashedly, and a second later Percy feels her magic sweep over him, clearing his sweat and replacing the taste of vomit in his mouth with mint. Once again, he has the urge to flinch, but also even having her magic on his body feels—*right*. Familiar. His fingers curl into his palms, as if to grab onto the sparks of magic that so briefly danced upon his body, though they of course slip off of his body and fizzle into the air, defiant and uncaught.

“Thanks,” he says hoarsely. As he looks around, he realises that there had been another party to his embarrassing fall: a young wizard, one that looks oddly familiar. In fact—

“Weasley?”

“Bulstrode,” Percy says in surprise. They had been in the same year at school; never close, but indelibly bound by being part of the same graduating class. Percy does not have to reach far into his memory to say, “I thought you were living as your aunt’s companion.”

Bulstode pinkens and glances at Severus, who looks back forbiddingly. “I was, yeah,” he admits. “My father sent me away after Professor Snape threatened him. I’m back now, but with my father in Azkaban, I thought it might be…nice…to work here as well.”

Bulstrode was still in prison? Percy forgets that he is upset at Severus and flicks a glance in his direction. Severus nods soberly.

“He didn’t even do anything,” Percy says in surprise. “I mean, he was *there*, but the worst thing I ever saw him do was eat the Dark Lord’s food. He was very kind to me.”

The younger Bulstrode seems cheered by this news. “Well, he’s only here for five years. My brother’ll be graduating from Hogwarts then; I reckon we’ll all move to my aunt’s, when he’s out. It’s not that bad, really. There isn’t much to do, so I’m able to spend a good amount of time with him. He’s helping me study to retake my NEWTs.”

“Your NEWTs?” Percy cannot remember hearing that Bulstrode had failed out of his seventh year. Nobody had in his year, if he was remembering correctly. It would have been very embarrassing and very public, as it had when the younger Flint boy had failed a few years later.

“The Ministry’s allowing anyone who graduated from Hogwarts in the last few years to retake their NEWTs, given everything,” Bulstrode explains quite cheerfully. Percy had never really spoken to the boy too much during their time at Hogwarts, but he had become oddly close to his father, at least in the same way that Percy had become close to all of their fathers, many of whom appeared obediently for Death Eater meetings and then fled to their homes the second the Dark Lord’s attention fell elsewhere. Yet Percy cannot help but admire Bulstrode’s positive attitude, given his father had been jailed, he was now consigned to working as a prison guard, and his mother, from the sounds of it, was not in the picture any longer. As with Liam, it gives Percy the odd sensation that perhaps he would have liked Bulstrode, had they ever had the chance to interact in school.

Still, Percy makes a mental note to review the papers more closely, and see who else may still be in Azkaban. He had given Tonks very careful notes of everyone’s crimes; surely it had

been clear that Bulstrode had done essentially nothing wrong, save allow Voldemort to brand the Mark onto his arm? Tonks gives a small shrug when he looks at her, askance; she had followed his instructions to apprehend each of the Death Eaters to allow them to stand trial, but she of course would not have been heavily involved in the proceedings.

(He also makes a mental note to ask Severus, whenever they are back to speaking, about his attempts to threaten Bulstrode and the rest to send their sons away. That was something he could have spoken about at his trial without revealing the story of Lily and the prophecy. Severus is sometimes so *thick* that Percy wants to strangle him.)

As Tonks had alluded to, there are not many Dementors in Azkaban anymore. Tonks is able to use her Auror badge to get them access into the deeper recesses of the prison, where a small group of Dementors are hovering, apparently waiting for further instruction. Bulstrode explains in an undertone that the twelve guards do most of the work; the Dementors are there only to enforce their authority, if need be, though as Bulstrode points out, the prison is nearly empty, save for a few dozen former Death Eaters, given that all of the earlier prisoners had been freed by the Dark Lord during one breakout or another.

“Thank you, Mr. Bulstrode,” Severus says, dismissing him firmly. Percy is reminded, seeing the boy bestow a cautious smile on his former professor, that he is are by appearance’s sake the same age as his classmate. Percy has not interacted with many of his peers of late and had grown accustomed to cataloguing his age against Severus’. It makes him uneasy, sometimes, like those first few months of being eleven. Percy feels the same uncertainty now, the same hesitation before he responds or speaks, as if unsure what he ought to be saying, and what would look out of place for him.

Left alone with the Dementors, Percy shivers as their attention turns on their small group. By mutual agreement, Severus and Tonks seem content to stand there silently until Percy does whatever he had done before to finagle knowledge out of the first Dementor. Percy clutches at the stone in his pocket and then takes a tiny step forward, the other Dementors billowing and adjusting in response as if the wind of his motion blew them across the room.

“Hello,” he says nervously. His voice seems thin and high in the draughty, dark room. It is devoid of all furniture, though there is a small, meagre fire in the grimy fireplace on the far wall, though the Dementors do not seem to be seeking out its warmth. Percy wonders what they do all day, trapped inside this room. Perhaps they, like he, merely while away the hours, staring into the shadows. “My name is Percy Weasley. I previously spoke to a Dementor, one stationed in the Ministry to aid with the capture and control of the Muggleborns.”

There is pregnant silence as all of the Dementors regard Percy quietly. Percy can feel their attention on him, cold and prickling, like frost beginning to form on the tip of his nose. Severus and Tonks remain still and silent behind him, and he resists the urge to turn and look at them for comfort.

Percy licks his dry lips and continues. “The Dementor and I became…on good terms,” he explains awkwardly. “He helped me save my father, and he introduced me to two of his…two other Dementors of his line.”

This time, Percy can sense a ripple of surprise move through the group of Dementors. They remind him of a school of fish, or perhaps a cluster jellyfish, hovering motionless in the water, but all sharing the same thought.

Percy hesitates and then draws out the small, grey stone. At the sight of it, all of the Dementors simultaneously stiffen and tense, and Percy begins to feel the acrid sting of their discomfort emanating as fear and despair…he begins to hear Fred's voice in his head, and then his mother's, and the feeling of Tom's lips on his…

"The Dementor gave this to me," Percy manages, noticing out of the corner of his eyes that Tonks and Severus have both stepped forward and drawn their wands. "There was a wizard, one who committed great atrocities with soul. He was…harming my soul, and the Dementor thought this might help me…understand and defeat the other wizard. In return, I swore that I would help the Dementor break his vow."

He should not have given that stone to you**,** echoes in Percy's mind, sternly, and Percy nearly drops the stone in his shock.

"Well, he did," Percy says uncomfortably. "This wizard…it was the Dark wizard that many of your kind followed."

We know of whom you speak.

Percy continues, his voice quieter, "He had done something incredibly wrong. He—he split his soul with a magical ritual that corrupted the natural process of death. He used the magic released by his murders to split his soul and contain it inside magical objects, so that he would not die."

Percy feels Tonks' agitation at his back, just as he feels the Dementors' burgeoning rage begin to burn inside him, in that place between his mind and the Dementors' voices.

"But the Dementor helped me," Percy says hastily. "He helped me to find these soul pieces and destroy them. We owe him a great debt."

Why have you come here to tell us this? The Dementor in front hovers closer to Percy, and Percy can smell its fetid breath and see the dark caves of its eyes from under his thick, dark cloak. A suggestion of a mouth, the stark lines of a skeleton, hidden behind shadows.

"Percy," says Tonks nervously behind him, and he flaps his hand at her to quiet her. He does not want to insult the Dementors.

"The Dementor I spoke to told me of your mission," Percy says quietly, not flinching away from the Dementor's gaze. "To ferry souls to the afterlife; to care for the magic that escapes from a soul at death, to ensure it is released correctly into the world. That's why there are so many Inferi now, isn't it? You have all been bound, and you cannot perform these tasks as you ought to, and the world is not at ease."

You should not know of such things.

“But I do know, and I’m glad I do.” Percy straightens unconsciously as he responds, and his voice begins to take on that formal cadence that he used to use so often as a…wizard. “It is not fair that you be bound, that you be prevented from fulfilling your ancient duty. I do not know who bound you, but knowledge of this has long passed from our part of the world. We think of you as Dark creatures, not capable of thought or speech.”

Because your kind does not think to ask, spits out the Dementor, and Percy feels its rage anchor and hook into the edges of his mind.

“I asked,” he gasps out, steeling himself as Tom threatens to swim in front of him, that sly, impenetrable look on his face. *You can be my sworn companion, if you like.* “I asked, and I would help, if I could. I’ve lost my magic—but my friend, she works at the Ministry. We can help you.”

Tonks shifts uncomfortably but does not contradict him. The Dementors retreat, physically and mentally, and Percy takes the opportunity to gasp out some of the tension that had gripped his chest.

“We need your help,” he finishes quietly, feeling instinctively that they are continuing to listen, though they have backed away. “We either need a way to contact the Dementor who spoke to me—or we need one of you to finish the job that he was helping me with. He went East, he said, to find more of your kind.”

The Dementors seem to confer quietly, their dark clothes rustling. Percy cannot help but wonder why their cloaks are tattered and bare. Do they feel the cold, or perhaps exult in it? Who lit the fire in the corner, and do they gather around it, when there are no wizards present? Do some of their kind create clothing for them to wear, or they take robes off the backs of wizards, as payment for providing their souls safe passage to whatever comes beyond?

We cannot track a soul unknown to us, says the first Dementor, who had been elected by some private vote to be the speaker. ***We will find the one of our kind who spoke to you. Give to us the stone that he gave you.***

“What do you want in exchange?” Percy asks shrewdly, not quite trusting how quickly the Dementors have changed their collective mind.

There is to be a gathering of our people, of the magnitude that has not been seen in our memory, intones the Dementor, solemnly. Percy shivers to think of it, dozens or hundreds of Dementors, hovering together, moving with the inhalation and exhalation of the same joint breath. ***We wish to attend. The witch will free us, or command us to go.***

Percy eyes Tonks, who meets his gaze with wide, questioning eyes. She must be itching to be involved, but Percy does not want to deliberate with her in front of the Dementor, who may take that as an indication that they do not intend to keep their promise. Forcing his fingers to move, he drops the stone in the Dementor’s palm, where it seems to fall through the crevices of the Dementor’s skeleton and disappear into the mist. “We can do that.”

Monitor the place where you last spoke, the Dementor says. Percy can tell it is pleased; for one, the air of horrid fear seems to recede, slightly, and for another, its voice in Percy's head is oddly lighter, less threatening. It sounds more like the Dementor that Percy had once spoken to, who had also extracted a promise from Percy, though again, not one that was binding. Perhaps that was the custom of their kind, rather than an expression of mistrust.

Percy inclines his head to the Dementor. "Thank you."

Severus and Tonks take their cue from him, bowing their heads as well, and leaving without inundating Percy with the dozens of questions that they must have. They make it out of the main visitor's room in Azkaban—Percy, a little self-consciously, returns Bulstrode's wave—but gather in a small clump outside, where the winds howl their misery into the air, and the sea tests its strength against the jagged black rock below. Percy shivers, and either Severus or Tonks hits him with a Warming charm without his having to ask.

"Well?" Tonks demands. Percy can see the faint blue sheen of a privacy ward hover in the air before it snaps into place around them. "What did they say?"

"How did it *speak* to you?" Severus' question is just a heartbeat behind. He frowns at Tonks, clearly affronted to be second, but looks at Percy expectantly.

Percy gives the kind of shrug that he *knows* Severus hates, but he cannot summon a better gesture to explain his own ignorance. "In—in my head, I suppose," he says awkwardly. "They said that they cannot find T…Tom's soul, not without having encountered it prior, but they will summon the Dementor that I used to speak with. He will meet us at the place where we last spoke: the Ministry, specifically the holding cells, or the room beyond the row of cells."

"I can check there," Tonks says thoughtfully. "It's around the corner from Moody's office. I'll just pop in, or set a ward."

Severus' voice is as chilly as the biting wind, and as sharp. "And in exchange?"

Percy smiles without humour. Of course Severus would think to ask the same question. "We will either free them, or Tonks will order them to attend the delegation of Dementors in the East, so that they may attend."

Percy winces, expecting outrage, but Tonks nods almost eagerly. "Definitely," she says. "I'd love to know what they are gathering for anyway. I didn't even know they could speak. How did you even find out that they could *talk*, Perce? Just walk up to one and ask it for help?"

"Something like that," Percy demurs, though he avoids Severus' eyes.

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In many ways, Percy's life is improved by the re-introduction of Tonks into his miniscule social circle, even as Severus continues to keep his distance. Tonks continues to work at the Ministry for the majority of the day, but she spends most of her evenings in Grimmauld Place, bullying Percy into a glass of wine or a game of chess, though she tends to lose interest halfway through and begins to manoeuvre her pieces so that they die the most violent death that Sirius' chess set can muster. (The pieces, in their limited capacity for animation, seem to take her commands as a challenge, beheading each other with gusto, or knocking each other off the board).

In other ways, however, Percy comes to mourn those months where he had been able to exist in a state of stupor, of half-aware languor, whiling away hours in his bed without being more than nominally aware of the passage of time. Now that his brain has woken up, even marginally, he begins bracingly aware of the silence of Grimmauld Place, broken occasionally by groaning pipes or creaking walls or the near-constant mutterings of Kreacher as he goes about his day. He becomes aware too of the cruelty that Severus had pointed out: his enforced solitude, day after day, now that Charlie has gone back to Romania and Bill has finally moved out of Shell Cottage and into a flat with Fleur.

Percy begins and discards a number of letters, primarily to his mother, to Severus, and to Ginny. The pleading, desperate tone of his letters disgusts him, and the majority of his attempts wind up in the fireplace. It is not that he wants their *company*, but rather an explanation of what they must think of him now. (In Severus' case, he supposes he knows perfectly well what is keeping Severus away, and the thought of sending him another letter on top of the last letter is too painful to contemplate).

The primary activity that Percy resolutely does not engage in is testing his magic, or his lack thereof, or researching Squibs, or vows, or in any way trying to concretise the reality of his new life. Tonks asks him about it, occasionally, clearly unwilling to allow him to pretend that nothing had happened, but he never has anything to say to her. He does not want to know the limits of his body. He does not want to know what he has been reduced to, not in any sort of clarity. If he avoids all Muggle tools and avoids all magic, he can pretend that he is existing by choice in a state of in-between, relying only on his own physical strength and the inherent magic of Grimmauld Place.

Draco and Tonks hit it off, as Percy had once predicted they might, after a frankly startling display of ruffled feathers and bristling Black pride between the cousins. Draco seems to take it as a personal affront that Tonks has all but moved into the Black family manor, and also that Percy had deigned to play *chess* with her where he'd all but ignored Draco, but Tonks manages to placate him by complimenting him on the sheer nerve it would have taken for Draco to break from the Dark Lord and run off with Harry.

She'd used several other choice words and references to certain aspects of Draco's physiology that Percy had blushed to hear. Even Draco had pinkened, but he'd looked cautiously pleased, particularly after he watched some of Tonks and Percy's chess game and realised that Tonks was not a skilled player.

"My mother wants to see you," Draco says during one of these games, taking over from Tonks after she'd sacrificed her queen and bishop to Percy's pawn. Tonks cedes her position

cheerfully and takes up residence on the arm of Draco's chair, peering over her cousin's back with mock solemnity.

Percy hesitates, and his pawn shakes its fist angrily at him. "Why?"

Draco shrugs, watching with an eagle eye as Percy sets the pawn back down on the chessboard. Not two minutes later, he strikes, untangling his knight from a dicey position and straightening out its course. "I'm not sure. Perhaps she wants to speak of my father. You two had some sort of…acquaintance, did you not?"

As usual, Percy cannot even begin to explain his relationship with Narcissa, or even Lucius. After the war's conclusion, all of the strange, fraught relationships of circumstance that he'd forged seem to be empty, filled with false urgency and artifice. He had liked Narcissa, and by Merlin, he had liked Lucius too, even though they he oughtn't have liked either, and he cannot sort out now which of those feelings were genuine or forced. "Of sorts."

"Well, she's likely a few weeks away from sending you a formal invitation," Draco says absently. Tonks tries to reach around him to move the knight again, but Draco slaps at her hand without a hint of self-admonishment. "It'll be rude for you to ignore it. I'll come by to fetch you at the proper time."

Percy is distracted throughout the rest of the game, and Draco manages to wrangle a decisive victory, even with the considerable handicap of Tonks' erratic opening. Percy had not personally witnessed Lucius' death, but he had played a hand in causing it, and though Draco had been surprisingly nonchalant about Percy's role, he cannot imagine that Narcissa would be equally sanguine to meet the person who killed her husband.

(*And her sister,* a voice whispers inside Percy's head).

"Scrimgeour is organising a gala, as well," Draco reports as he prepares to leave, accepting his pressed and steamed outerwear from Kreacher with a well-bred nod and shrugging it on over his silk shirt. "He's going to be awarding the Order of Merlin to various war heroes. It's not too late for you, you know. You saved his life. I wouldn't be surprised if he gave you one anyway."

Percy's face immediately sours. "We've already had this conversation, Draco."

Draco shrugs. "I'm not fool enough to have it again," he says winsomely, with some of his mother's charm. "But I thought you would be interested to know."

Tonks tries to ask Percy a follow-up question, but he forestalls all conversation with a scowl and heads up to bed early, leaving her to clean up the chessboard and Floo home. He does not want to think about attending a *gala*. In fact, he most definitely will not attend, not if there will be other people there, ready to gawk at him, press for his story, and express either their sympathies or their pleasure at his affliction.

The only person he thinks that may dread such an event more than him would be Severus. The idea of Severus scowling as he receives an Order of Merlin is the only even remotely

positive thought that Percy can muster up about the whole idea. Perhaps he ought to write to Scrimgeour and suggest he nominate Severus. Percy thinks he certainly deserves it.

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August 1998

In the end, Percy does not write to Scrimgeour, but Scrimgeour writes to Percy: an elaborate invitation requesting Percy's presence in the Minister's office, the day after next, at two o'clock in the afternoon for *tea and conversation*. Percy scowls at the scroll when he receives it and twists the ribbon that had lacily adorned it savagely between his hands.

Percy is very familiar with this parchment, with its gilded edges and elaborate script, the ink so dark and creamy it almost looks as if it is still wet. He is familiar too with the wording, one of the several stock letters that they use to invite people to events, and familiar with Scrimgeour's signature. He looks for the small flourish at the end of the *r* that the signature spell automatically adds but has to conclude that Scrimgeour had actually signed the letter by hand, which makes him feel marginally better about being at the receiving end of one of these notes.

He's tempted to write back a rude *no*. (He knows the stock letter format for that as well). Percy knows he will have to make his way to the Ministry eventually, if only to speak to the Dementor when it eventually returns to this side of England, but he does not think he could stomach an actual trip to the Minister's office, particularly because the letter conspicuously did not mention whether anyone else would be attendance for *tea and conversation*. The last time Percy had been inside the Minister's office, he'd been illegally controlling the Minister of Magic with a Dark curse and sending the dark Auror forces to hunt down the Boy Who Lived, who had just broken into Gringotts in search of a Horcrux. Now, Percy would be returning as a Muggle, or a Squib; certainly a man in disgrace, only a guest.

Percy is also immediately wary of any event that would request his presence in such a formal way. If Scrimgeour had something to say to him—a scolding, for instance, of the utter mess that Percy must have made of the Ministry, or a belated notification that he was to be banished from the Wizarding World, or anything in between—then presumably Scrimgeour could write him a letter with his own words, or show up at Percy's door, or book him on a one-way ticket to Azkaban.

Percy resolutely decides to ignore the summons, though he frets about it for the next two days, and forty-five minutes before the specified time, he is yanking a wet comb through his persistent curls and examining his face for spots. He isn't planning on going; he has not arranged any transportation, and so he cannot even get to the Ministry, though he supposes that Kreacher could probably take him, or he could unearth his wand from its inert grave in the desk drawer and attempt to call the Knight Bus. No, he isn't going. He is merely completing his morning toilette at eleven in the morning as he couldn't sleep last night and only dragged himself out of bed at ten. He is only wearing his dark green Wizarding robes

because he is cold inside the draughty house, and because they remind him of Auntie Muriel, who had written him a letter last night complaining that nobody had informed her that he was staying with the Blacks and inviting him to the Prewett summer home, now that Bill has moved out and left her alone.

When Tonks arrives fifteen minutes later, he is sitting demurely at Regulus' desk, dressed and fed, and replying conscientiously to Auntie Muriel with his very best handwriting.

"Good," Tonks says as an introduction, flicking her eyes across his frame. He flinches at the sound of her voice shattering the tomb-like silence but continues to write each letter with exquisite precision. "You got the letter. Scrimgeour was worried it didn't breach the Black wards, so he sent me here to fetch you."

"I'm afraid I cannot attend," Percy says absently, concentrating on his letter. *...Madam Black has been very kind to me to allow me to stay here, but I do not see her often…*

Tonks rolls her eyes. Even without looking up, Percy can sense the force of her irritation. "Percy, let's go. We both know you're going. You're wearing the bloody robes; you've been summoned by the Minister himself; of course you're going."

"I'm not going, Tonks," Percy snaps, his hand jerking, and leaving an unsightly blot on the parchment. The sight of it rankles him; without his magic, he cannot merely spell it away, and so will have to begin the letter anew. "I'm not going to go to the Ministry. Scrimgeour can come here if he wishes to speak to me."

"Percy—" Tonks begins, annoyed, and then she blows air loudly through her pursed lips and moves closer to the desk. Her voice is softer when she starts again. "Percy, I can take you straight there. Scrimgeour authorised me to bypass the entry checks at the Ministry. Nobody will see you."

That Percy *had* been worried about being shepherded through the entry checks does not soften his own tone when he replies, "I don't have anything to say to Scrimgeour, Tonks. All the trials are over. I no longer work at the Ministry."

"Look, Percy, you know I was never Scrimgeour's biggest fan, but he's not a bad Minister, and he's doing his best to get everyone moving again after the war," Tonks says quietly, leaning against the doorframe. "Just hear what he has to say."

"Who is even going to this meeting?" Percy looks up and notices to his surprise that Tonks looks tired. Not as tired as she'd looked prior to the Final Duel, but still tired. Oughtn't everything be easy, now, with all of the Death Eaters locked away or pardoned, and nothing but galas and afternoon teas to attend? They don't even have to plan the reams of funerals that Percy had lived through in his first lifetime, though there still are funerals, and he has made note of them somewhere inside his mind, the obituaries and announcements section the only part of the *Prophet* that he regularly peruses.

"I've not been invited," Tonks admits. "In fact, I only know about your meeting because Scrimgeour wanted me to fetch you. I wouldn't be surprised if it was just you, to be honest."

This makes Percy feel marginally better. Perhaps Scrimgeour had just sent him the elaborate invitation because he'd thought Percy would be more likely to respond to it. Percy crumples the letter to Auntie Muriel, stands, and straightens his robes. Crisply, as if the answer were hardly a concern for him, "Are you to bring me back as well?"

Tonks gives him an encouraging smile, as if he weren't asking her essentially to shepherd himself around like a child. Percy remembers that intricate map of London: Grimmauld in smaller letters, Whitehall in larger ones. Perhaps he could have…*walked* there, or Merlin forbid, attempted to take the train. "It's my day off, so I have nothing to do except to stand around and wait for you."

"Oh, don't do that," Percy immediately protests, embarrassed by her honesty. "I can take the Knight Bus—"

"I want to come with you, you prat," Tonks groans. "Let's go. You can buy me a beer after, if you'd like to apologise for taking up my time. I know you still have piles of Galleons in that vault of yours, even if you refuse to go to Gringotts to look at any of it."

It's Percy's turn to roll his eyes, but he does grab his money pouch before he follows Tonks downstairs. He hasn't gone to Gringotts, but he hasn't spent any money, either, so it still jingles with a reassuring weight when he slides it into his messenger bag and slings the bag over his shoulder, where it settles, comfortable and familiar, like an old friend.

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Unfortunately, the group that awaits him in Scrimgeour's office is possibly the *last* confluence of people he'd like to see in the Ministry of Magic: Severus, Harry, Ron, and Hermione, all implausibly holding delicate cups of tea and glaring at each other while Scrimgeour busies himself with pouring by hand.

"Ah, Percy," the Minister says, perhaps a tad gratefully, as Tonks opens the door and ushers Percy in. The journey to the Ministry had been less embarrassing than Percy had envisioned; Tonks had been able to bring him directly into the inner chambers of the Minister, where Percy and Mathilda had once set up their desks. (Percy is discomfited to see that his desk is still there, virtually untouched, though Mathilda's has been cleaned and emptied). She'd kindly given Percy the time he needed to settle his stomach after the Apparation before contritely admitting that she'd not found many volunteers to practise her Side-Along with since Severus pointed out all of its flaws.

The oddity of the room's occupants is enough to distract Percy from the sting of being back in the Minister's office, with its familiar opulence and quiet buzz of activity. Scrimgeour has not changed the office at all, which Percy supposes makes sense, given Percy hadn't changed it a bit for Pius after he'd faked Scrimgeour's death. Still, it is odd to see Scrimgeour settle himself back behind the large wooden desk, rather than to see Pius sitting mutely, awaiting

instruction, or Tom, laying his feet carelessly on top of the piles of parchment that Percy would nervously organise and re-organise whenever he had spare time to worry.

Severus gives him a pained grimace, and Percy takes the only open seat next to him. He supposes in the face of far greater enemies, Severus would prefer his company, even if the brittle iciness between them has not quite thawed.

A second later, Scrimgeour floats him a cup of tea. Percy takes it lithely from the air, holding it with his best pureblood gesture, pinky up, index finger and thumb touching, as if Narcissa Malfoy herself were evaluating him. Despite his intermittent attempts during the war to purchase and consume interesting blends of tea, Percy thinks uncharitably that he has quite reached his limit of having weakly brewed tea forced upon him by people attempting to trap him into conversation. Nothing positive ever comes from being handed a cup of tea. He sets it down on the small table next to him without drinking, though also without an unseemly clink.

"Excellent, excellent," Scrimgeour says, stirring a sugar cube into his own cup without any hint that he has picked up on the tense atmosphere of the room. The Minister's office is large, but not large enough to seat five people in a row; as a result, Ron and Hermione are slightly to the back, their chairs tilted away from the large enchanted window. Harry and Severus are directly in front of the desk, and Percy is on the opposite side as his brother, the closest to the Minister. If he were still Scrimgeour's aid, he would have told him not to seat Severus and Harry close to each other; the two are visibly bristling, and though they both look straight ahead, they may as well be glaring openly at each other. Ron and Hermione have similar resigned, rueful expressions on their faces, and when Percy accidentally catches Ron's eyes, his brother widens his eyes in irritation across the room. It's a surprisingly intimate look to receive from someone he hasn't spoken to in many months, and it takes Percy a second to respond to it by raising his eyebrows, as if to say, *I didn't plan this either.*

"Why are we here?" Harry says abruptly, rudely. "Why are *they* here?"

They. Percy cannot help but be offended at the comparison to Severus, though of course in this room, he is more similar to Severus than anyone else. Still; Severus played a large part in Harry's parents' deaths, so the animosity is justifiable, but Percy helped Harry openly. During their last meeting, Percy had excused Harry's behaviour, but it has been long enough that their teenaged Boy Who Lived ought to have grown out of it by now. Harry is eighteen; his birthday had been celebrated just days prior by scores of jubilant wizards across the land.

"You are here, Mr. Potter," Scrimgeour responds, his voice far icier than it had been only minutes prior, "to discuss the gala that we've planned for the end of August, the day before the Hogwarts Express will take the students back to the next year of Hogwarts."

"I'll be there," Harry says obstinately. "Is that what you've come to ask? I won't give a speech, though."

Percy has to wonder, despite his irritation with Harry's rudeness, what Harry has been doing for the past few months. Percy has been avoiding reading the paper or asking about Harry or generally educating himself about the state of the Wizarding World, but he cannot imagine their society has let Harry hide away in a house and pretend to be dead. He's probably

already been strong-armed into giving speeches and interviews and testifying at trials, which, Percy concedes, would explain some of his belligerent behaviour. Percy cannot imagine a more trying ordeal for Harry, save for being tasked to die to defeat the Dark Lord.

"As part of the ceremony, I will be bestowing the Order of Merlin to a variety of individuals," Scrimgeour explains, making eye contact with each of them in turn. "Certainly we will be awarding far more awards than have been given simultaneously in the past. There will be some pushback, of course, but I believe that we ought to formally celebrate those who aided in protecting our society."

Percy's own unease is clearly mirrored on Severus' face, through the miniscule twitching of his lips and the slight flaring of his nostrils.

Scrimgeour steeples his fingers and continues. "I will be primarily awarding the Order of Merlin, Third Class, to those who acted bravely: most members of the Order, for example, or some of those who behaved heroically to aid those in danger. Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley, I intend to award you both the Order of Merlin, Second Class, along with Mr. Draco Malfoy, Ms. Nymphadora Tonks, and a handful of other individuals, particularly those involved in the construction and maintenance of the escape routes out of the country and the network of safehouses."

"Landon Greengrass," Percy says, interrupting the Minister. Scrimgeour frowns at him, but Percy says firmly, "Landon Greengrass. He deserves an award."

"I worked closely with Landon," Scrimgeour says softly, and Percy sees something pass over the Minister's face, a shadow of Percy's own regret and guilt. "Yes. I intend to award Landon an Order of Merlin, Second Class, as he justly deserves."

Percy settles back in his chair, mollified. He glances at Ron, wondering whether he or Hermione would be upset at being awarded only a Second Class medal, rather than the First Class that Harry will almost certainly receive. His brother's face is alight with pride, however, and he squeezes Hermione's hand enthusiastically. Good. Any Order of Merlin is a high honour, and Percy is glad to see that Ron does not appear to be harbouring any jealousy.

Harry, on the other hand, immediately objects. "They deserve the First Class medal," he says, motioning to his friends. "They were with me every step of the way."

"In truth, Mr. Potter, I think nearly everyone deserves a First Class medal, regardless of their individual actions," Scrimgeour says, raising an eyebrow, which takes some of the wind out of Harry's sails. "But that would go against centuries of tradition, and so I organised a committee to decide who ought to get what medal. The committee was headed by Minerva McGonagall and I was not involved in the deliberations, before you accuse me of blatant partiality."

Harry, who had clearly been considering just that, closes his mouth mutinously.

"There will be very few recipients of the Order of Merlin, First Class." Scrimgeour pauses. Percy is familiar enough with the other man that he can see the way that he steels himself

before his next words. “I intend to award this to you, Mr. Potter, as well as to Mr. Snape and to Mr. Weasley.”

Percy reflects later that perhaps this would be the first time when all three proposed recipients of the medal protest at once, nearly in unison, and with equal vehemence. Likely it would be the last time that the three of them ever agreed on something.

“Quiet,” snaps Scrimgeour, over their voices. “This is not a negotiation.”

“We spoke of this once before, Minister,” Severus says, his voice at his coldest and sharpest, so that Percy flinches even to hear it. Scrimgeour bears it more stoically. “I will refuse the medal if you try and award it to me.”

“Good,” says Harry coldly. “That way, I don’t have to refuse it for you.”

“Harry,” Percy snaps, almost at the same time as Hermione, and to his surprise, even Ron, a second later. They look at each other, taken aback, and Percy subsides, so that Hermione can speak. She manages, “Harry, don’t say that. You heard what the Headmaster said about Professor Snape.”

“Dumbledore trusted Severus above all else,” Percy cannot help but say, nastily, “or do you no longer regard Dumbledore’s opinions highly?”

Harry turns a venomous glare on Percy, but Percy has seen worse. He bears it stoically.

“Quiet, all of you,” Scrimgeour thunders, and they all fall resentfully quiet, bound at least by the nominal authority of the Minister of Magic. “Mr. Potter, I will be awarding you this medal for your bravery and courage as the Boy Who Lived, facing off with Voldemort multiple times, helping to weaken him by destroying his life wards, and being willing to sacrifice yourself at the very end.”

At Percy’s confused look, caught from across the room, Hermione pipes up, “The Minister has told everyone that Voldemort created a series of life wards to augment his power, and that Harry, Professor Snape, and some members of the Order worked to destroy those items.”

“Also that Harry came intending to sacrifice himself, but that he was able to defeat Voldemort in a duel,” contributes Ron, before subsiding hastily at Harry’s glower.

Percy does not particularly like this interpretation of events. He does not want to point the general population in the direction of life wards any more than he would have wanted them to learn about Horcruxes, but he supposes that the Minister wanted to preserve as much of the truth as possible. Fool, he; Percy would have told the public a sanitised, heroic version of events, with the Boy Who Lived slaying the Dark Lord with the Sword of Gryffindor, something to be written about in history books but without revealing any pertinent information that may inspire a copycat, or someone as idiotic as Percy.

However, Percy supposes that with this explanation, Harry’s acts are more in line with those of Severus’, which would explain their shared classification as *First Class*. Without the knowledge that Harry housed the Dark Lord directly in his mind, that he went to his death so

that Voldemort's Horcrux would be killed, Harry's part in the play is reduced to a heroic final duel, and an entire year of dangerous hide and seek. Perhaps that is what is responsible for the unhappy twist to Harry's mouth.

"I will be awarding the medal to Mr. Snape for his collaboration with Albus Dumbledore to keep Harry Potter safe, for his courage and bravery in spying on Voldemort, for the lives saved by the information he passed to the Order of the Phoenix, for keeping the Hogwarts students as safe as he could, and for his work in destroying the life wards in secret."

Harry snorts audibly, and Percy has had enough. "Stop acting like a *child,*" he hisses to Harry, who stiffens visibly at the insult. "You were just one part of the war; an important part, but a single part, or did you not spend most of your life insisting you are nothing special? So Severus bullied you. So he made a mistake in his youth. You have *no idea* the lives that he helped to save. You have *no idea* what he had to do in order to help destroy the *life wards*. Merlin's beard, Harry, aren't you tired of this infantile anger?"

Harry stands, nearly knocking his chair to the floor, and Ron and Hermione leap to their feet as well. Percy would have gone for his wand, if he had a wand, but he notices in his hesitation that Ron and Hermione seem to be—intent on subduing Harry, or wrestling him back into his seat, rather than helping him curse Percy or Severus.

Severus, uncharacteristically, says nothing, perhaps in part due to the fierce glare that Percy levies at him, promising retribution if he opens his mouth and says something cutting to further incite Harry to anger. Instead, he takes a delicate sip of his tea and turns his attention deliberately away from Harry, his eyes cool and distant.

When Harry is back in his seat and Ron and Hermione back in theirs, Scrimgeour speaks again, but this time only to Severus. "I know that you do not wish to receive this award," he says quietly, as if Harry's outburst had not occurred. "But *think*, Severus. This Dark Lord came from Slytherin House; he targeted Slytherin wizards; he exploited Slytherin pride. You were the Head of Slytherin House, and you worked to save as many of your students as you could, and you betrayed Voldemort when you realised what harm he was capable of inflicting on our world. You inspired your godson to defy Lucius Malfoy; you helped Andromeda Black reunite with her family. You employed Dark magic in partnership with Albus Dumbledore, the greatest Light wizard of our time, and you did it to save Harry Potter, the son of your enemy. You would be the first Slytherin wizard to receive the Order of Merlin since Arcturus Black, and I have it on good authority that he all but purchased the award for himself. Don't let *Voldemort* be the legacy of Slytherin House, Severus."

Severus is quiet, but Percy can tell that this interpretation of events is strange for Severus to hear. Percy is glad that Severus is hearing it. Severus is so used to evaluating his actions only in the context of *redemption* for his one grave sin that to hear that he may be an inspiration, that he may leave a legacy…Percy knows that would be difficult for Severus to bear, and that every second that Severus does not immediately refuse is a second that he is warring with his natural inclination to think the worst of himself.

Scrimgeour takes the opportunity to turn to Percy, who tenses at the look that his old boss gives him. "And you, Mr. Weasley. I intend to award this medal to you for your work over the last five years to defeat the life wards of Tom Riddle; for working as a spy with Mr. Snape;

for doing your best to mitigate harm in the Ministry; for saving the lives of dozens of Muggleborns, both in terms of ending the Muggleborn Trials and for establishing a highly effective route of safehouses; for passing highly valuable information to Nymphadora Tonks; and for having the courage to weather society's judgement as you worked in secret."

"No," says Percy, calmly, and without any of Harry's passion or Severus' iciness. He lifts his chin and meets Scrimgeour's eyes solidly. The man cannot scare Percy; he is barely Percy's Minister, now that Percy is all but a Muggle. "You may award me a Third Class medal if you wish for my work with the safehouses and for passing information to Tonks. I am happy for you to highlight my role as a spy, so that it may comfort those who thought me irredeemable. But I will not accept a medal on the same level of honour as Harry and Severus. I battled against Tom, but it was my own actions that brought Tom into existence and equipped him with the knowledge and magic to pose a threat to our world. Had I acted with integrity and wisdom, I never would have created such a problem."

Severus snorts, over Scrimgeour's immediate protest. "Really," Severus says dryly. "And what is it that you ought to have done differently?"

"I should have bloody well told Dumbledore the second I found the diary, if not sooner," Percy snaps back. He thinks of his earlier pride with shame, his childish conviction that he could handle the Horcrux-Tom, that he would be better suited to find the Horcruxes than Dumbledore. He had been angry that Dumbledore had overlooked him, but he had spurned Dumbledore's attempts to recruit him. He had been angry that Dumbledore so often turned Hogwarts into a battlefield, but hadn't Percy done the same through his inaction? Hadn't Percy had done the same to the Ministry, time and time again? Percy had twisted himself through time to right his wrongs, and he'd let his pride lead him down the wrong path, though he ought to have known better. "I shouldn't have created a portrait from the diadem. I should have worked harder to find Harry, earlier in the war—"

"Let's take those in order, shall we?" Severus interrupts coolly. Again, he straightens and readies himself, and his mouth twists around the words. The others in the room are silent, wide-eyed, even Harry. "Had you told Albus of the diary in your sixth year, perhaps he would have recognised it for what it was. Perhaps he would have written in it then, as he did later, and for a much longer period of time. Perhaps he would have told Tom some of his own secrets, or allowed Tom to feed on his magic, or lost control of himself. One of Tom's Horcruxes killed Dumbledore, so he clearly was not impervious to it."

"He would have found the other Horcruxes sooner—"

"Would he have?" Severus shakes his head. "At most, your arrogance in speaking to Tom cost us only a year, for Albus would have become aware of the Horcruxes after the Chamber of Secrets was opened. Even at his death, Albus did not know what the other Horcruxes were. Would Tom have told him, his most hated enemy? Perhaps Albus would have found the diadem within Hogwarts, or the locket in the cave. Would he have brought me along? He would not have brought Potter, who was but a child. Perhaps he would have succumbed alone to the Draught of Despair. It nearly killed him when he drank it later, didn't it, Potter?"

Harry nods mutely, and surprisingly without rancour. Percy bristles at this line of questioning, but he cannot think of a coherent objection, and so he allows Severus to continue while he

marshals his thoughts.

“So perhaps the diary would have possessed him, which would have been catastrophic, or he would have succumbed to the locket’s defences. Even if he then learned of the other Founder’s Artefacts so corrupted, would he have easily found them? Would he have been allowed into Bellatrix Black’s Gringotts vault? Even the mighty Albus Dumbledore could not force his way into Gringotts, at least not until a war had broken out.”

“But he would have had more time—”

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Severus says, cutting off Percy. “And I remind you, we did not know the identity of the Horcruxes either. Albus would have taken the diary into his office and never revealed to either of us what it said, as he did later. Perhaps he would have told Potter, but perhaps not. We do not know. Tom would not have trusted any of us as he trusted you, which brings us to the second point: the portrait. The diary did not know what the diadem knew. At the time, we needed to force the diadem to tell us what we knew, and that you had the skill to turn the diadem into a portrait was nothing short of extraordinary. You managed to extract the truth out of Tom; he told you of the Horcruxes willingly, and you destroyed them in secret.”

Harry is quiet, and Percy glances at him, thinking of a boy in another timeline, who had completed the same set of thankless tasks, a few months later and with a host of others dead in his wake, but bravely, and without prior knowledge, and without the support of Severus Snape. How had he done it? Eleven years in this timeline have given Percy a greater window into the life of Harry Potter, but he still could not fathom how the boy had defeated the Horcruxes alone, if he had truly managed it by the conclusion of the war.

“Let us then turn to the third point. Albus knew of your true identity; he made the choice to only inform a select subset of the Order as to your mission. He chose not to tell Potter, to give you a way to communicate with him, even though he knew that he was soon to die, and that you would be under close supervision. Potter was safe in Grimmauld Place. He should have sat out the rest of the war there, until he was the last Horcrux.”

“Dumbledore gave *me* the mission to destroy the Horcruxes—” Harry begins, bristling.

“Albus gave you the mission to die,” thunders Severus. “And you did so, with courage befitting your parents, Potter. Perhaps Albus did want you to find the Horcruxes; Albus was obsessed with symmetry, as the Dark Lord was too. But there was no reason for him not to ally us, Potter, to teach you the type of Occlumency that would have protected you, to give us a way to communicate when it became necessary. He did not even tell Minerva what he planned, nor Alastor, nor Kingsley, nor Arthur nor Molly. He left you needlessly alone.”

Harry subsides quietly, perhaps thinking over this strange note of sympathy from his hated professor, but Percy has to say, agonised, his voice a nearly silent rasp, “I nearly killed my father, Severus.”

“Because Albus stationed him in the Ministry of Magic, with no way to protect against Nagini,” points out Severus. “Perhaps you brought Tom to life, but you convinced him to tell you what the other Horcruxes were, and we would have been lost without that.” Then

Severus' voice changes, just slightly, as he looks back toward the others in the room. "I am not blaming Albus, though it sounds as if I am. He acted in ways he believed were best, and he had many to protect, and much on his mind. But his insistence on keeping his plans private pushed many into actions that later seem incorrect, though at the time they seemed to be the only viable choices."

"It is interesting, Severus," says Scrimgeour, who up until this point had been silent. "I believed that I knew the entire story, from your letter to Minerva, yet each time we speak I find there to be new details to learn."

Letter to Minerva? Percy frowns at Severus, who avoids his gaze.

"I have said what I intend to say," Severus says shortly.

"And Mr. Weasley, hearing this news from Severus only solidifies my determination to present the award."

"Minister, I've *lost my magic*," Percy says viciously, reaching for the last weapon in his arsenal. The other occupants in the room flinch, but Scrimgeour merely stares at him steadily. "I don't think I'm even allowed to be in the Ministry of Magic, and I certainly won't get up on stage and have everyone look at me like I'm some sort of freak."

"Don't say that," says Harry, bizarrely, before flushing and falling silent again.

Percy eyes him but then looks back to the Minister. "I won't attend," he says again, but more quietly. "Please, Minister. You do not need to bestow upon me an award; I will not be the first Gryffindor, nor the most deserving Weasley, to be nominated."

"I respect your wishes on the matter," says Scrimgeour magnanimously, dropping the argument with surprising—suspicious—grace. He turns back to Severus and Harry. "I trust you two have no further objections to accepting your award? You may have to say a few words, but not a speech, Mr. Potter. You may say thank you and move on."

Harry scowls, but without as much heat, and nods quietly. Scrimgeour turns his gaze to Severus. One by one, they all look at Severus, who had receded into his chilly exterior after his surprising outburst. Finally, Severus nods once, and Percy feels relieved, despite himself.

"Good," Scrimgeour says, rubbing his hands together. "I will send you all further details as necessary, and let me be the first to thank you all for your service during this war."

They make their awkward way outside of the room, where Tonks is nearly vibrating with impatience, perched on Percy's old desk. "Finally," she breathes when they file out, all avoiding each other's eyes, the thin bond of their acquaintance shattered without Scrimgeour to act as a common enemy. "You've got to come with me, *now*."

"What's happened?" Ron asks, his hand going to his wand.

"The Dementor," Tonks says, much to the Trio's confusion. Percy wants to glare at her. "It's here. It arrived fifteen or so minutes ago; it triggered my ward. We've got to go *now*, who

knows how long it will stay here?"

"What Dementor?" Hermione asks, but Tonks ignores her. Her eyes seek Percy's, who nods irritably. They would have needed Harry, eventually; perhaps the Dementor had sensed all of them gathered in the building, and had come for that reason. Regardless, they cannot risk losing him, not when he could answer their final question.

Despite the urgency, their way to the holding cells is slower than Percy would like, particularly because their odd grouping of people causes nearly everyone in their path to stop and gawk. Tonks tries to help by flashing her Auror badge and hustling them along, but Percy cannot help but think that doing so will cause rumours. What official Auror business could Harry Potter be engaged in, with *Severus Snape*? Not to mention, Percy is now exceedingly certain that many people thought him dead, for the looks of shock he receives from some of the people that he recognises trend toward the shocked and horrified, rather than the curious. He sees Liam, of all people, nearly drop a sheath of papers at the sight of him.

"Explain it to them, will you?" Percy says brusquely to Tonks, hovering at the entrance to the inner room past the rows of holding cells. (Harry, Hermione and Ron have stopped to look in them, perhaps aghast, but Percy is too impatient to linger). Without waiting for an answer, he steps inside, Severus close behind.

It is *his* Dementor. Percy is surprised both that he immediately recognises him, and that he immediately feels relief deep inside his bones. He knows that there is no guarantee that the Dementor will help them, or that the news he will bring will be positive, but the Dementor is so oddly familiar to him that it brings him comfort nevertheless.

"Hello," he says eagerly to the Dementor, who inclines its head slowly in response.

Hello.

"Thank you for returning. I mean—for heeding the summons. If you received the summons, I mean." Percy feels himself almost babbling and is glad that Harry and the rest are still outside. Severus' disapproving eyes on his back helps him pull himself together. "I am sorry to call you here, but I need one last thing from you."

I have heard that from you before. Percy's head shoots up, but something in the Dementor's tone suggests humour, almost the echo of a laugh. ***I cannot stay for long. We are gathering, in the East. The largest gathering of our kind of our time.***

"I heard," Percy confirms. "Was that you, that initiated it? Did you find what you were seeking?"

I sought answers, and I found some, the Dementor replies, ***but there is much for my people to discuss. The wizard who called himself the Dark Lord left many of us free, more so than at any one time since we were bound. We must decide what to do with our freedom.***

Percy nods thoughtfully. He had not thought what the other communities must be grappling with in the wake of the Final Duel; the goblins who had to re-establish their system of order, the centaurs who had fought for the Dark Lord, the giants who had been promised dominance

over their land, the werewolves who had been encouraged to turn others. None of the communities were monoliths, as Percy had learned, and all had much to gain and lose from Voldemort's defeat. "Well, I wish you luck," he says. "I can no longer do very much for you or your people, but you may call upon me, if I may aid you in any way."

What has happened to you, to drive such a claim from your lips? The Dementor hovers closer, but Percy cannot feel any of the dread or fear he would expect. Perhaps he can no longer feel it, now that he is not a wizard.

"I—I lost my magic," Percy admits, honestly. "I made a vow to a wizard, the one who calls himself the Dark Lord. I broke the vow." Then he frowns. "Can you…not tell?"

The Dementor regards him thoughtfully. Percy is only half-aware of the others filing in behind him, silent and watchful. With a slow, deliberate movement, the Dementor raises its hand and spreads its skeletal fingers over Percy's chest, as if sensing something unseen.

I cannot sense wizarding magic, as I can sense your soul, the Dementor says finally. ***But I can tell when someone lacks magic entirely, and you are not one of that kind.***

"A Squib, perhaps," Percy says with an embarrassed twist of his lips. Despite telling himself otherwise, he does not really think he is a Muggle. But can he say to be a Squib would be any better? At least if he were a Muggle, he would have an excuse to avoid magic entirely; as a Squib, he is not locked out of any spaces, saved for his own lack of ability, of power. He flushes when he realises that Harry and the others have joined them and are listening curiously.

It is beyond my understanding to say what you are capable of doing.

Percy waves this aside self-consciously. He does not need the Dementor to tell him what he already knows: he's lost his magic, and there is no way to get it back. Instead, he says, "I need your help, if you may give it. The seven Horcruxes that you have sensed for us before have been destroyed—or so we think. However, we have no way to confirm."

The Dementor is quiet for several long moments, as he often is, floating silently in the space in front of Percy. Percy cannot help but be anxious as he waits for the Dementor to respond. It would be a lie to say that part of him, in the very back of his mind, has not had the thought that perhaps Tom is not dead, perhaps he may still be in this world—

The soul within the boy has been destroyed, the Dementor says presently, lifting a long finger to point at Harry, who shifts uncomfortably behind Percy, his robes rustling loudly in the room. ***As is the soul that had previously been…enmeshed in yours.***

"But the one from the diadem, the portrait," Percy says, feeling numb at the confirmation. "That one too?"

Yes, the Dementor says, and Percy exhales gustily, a sound like the whistling wind. ***I felt it when the soul of the wizard left this world entirely. It was not ferried by one of our own; it was destroyed.***

Percy tampers down a swelling of sadness for Tom, destroyed even in death, and turns back to the wizards assembled behind him. “All gone,” he says gruffly. “The Horcrux inside Harry, and all of the others.”

Severus’ face is impassive, but the others have varying expressions of relief and curiosity. Percy turns back to the Dementor to avoid looking at any of them.

“Thank you,” he says softly. “Thank you for everything you have done for us. We owe you a debt, and we do not take that obligation lightly.”

The Dementor continues to regard Percy. Even as the teenagers shift impatiently behind Percy, Percy is caught by the intensity he can just make out emanating from under that dark, mysterious hood. The Dementor has something more to say to Percy; he can tell.

But when the Dementor speaks, he says only, ***I wish to speak to the boy*.**

Percy cannot entirely conceal the flash of impatience that crosses his face, but he hopes that only the Dementor had seen it, and perhaps the Dementor would not recognise the human expression for what it was. Instead, he turns around again to Harry and says brusquely, “He wants to speak to you. Be *polite;* he has helped us greatly. You will hear his voice in his head, and you will respond out loud.”

Harry’s face very clearly indicates that he wants nothing more than to leave this room and its confusing occupants behind, but he bravely steps forward and looks evenly at the Dementor.

“Hello,” prompts Percy.

“Er—hello,” Harry says, some of his antagonism melting away in the face of his awkwardness. Without the bristling anger, he looks far more like the Harry that Percy has known for years, the Harry that Percy had tried fruitlessly to protect, in his own, artless way. “Thank…thank you for what you have done for us.”

For the first time, Percy sees the effect of the Dementor speaking to another person. There is no sound, but Harry’s face changes visibly as he reacts to whatever the Dementor has said inside his head. It is clear from the forcefulness of the Dementor’s invisible gaze, the way his body is angled toward Harry, that he is saying *something*, but Percy has no idea what he may be sharing. It is infuriating to be so visibly locked out of the conversation, and Percy has to belatedly commend Severus and Tonks for being silent throughout Percy’s earlier conversation at Azkaban.

Percy can only watch as Harry’s face grows tighter and tighter, drawing in on itself, his eyes green and dark under his wire-rimmed glasses. “That’s not true,” he spits out, only to be silenced by whatever the Dementor says next.

Finally, Harry can take it no longer, and he wrenches his gaze savagely from the Dementor and sprints from the room. Hermione and Ron exchange a look before they run after Harry; Tonks makes a gesture toward following them and then hesitates, clearly unsure of who demands her loyalty.

“Go after them,” Percy says tiredly. “Severus can bring me back, if need be. We are safe here.”

Left alone with Severus, everything unsaid between them looms large. To avoid Severus, Percy looks back to the Dementor. “What do you say to him?”

The boy did not understand what it meant, to shelter another’s soul in your own for so many years, the Dementor says with a hint of impatience. ***I merely informed him that his own soul would need to be carefully nourished, for him to recover fully.***

“And that made him so upset?”

I do not believe he has admitted that he has been injured, the Dementor says acerbically before turning its attention onto Percy. ***Much like you, young wizard.***

Percy wars between two denials before landing on, “I am not a wizard.”

The Dementor ignores him. ***I can see more fully what has happened, but not everything. You must tell me.***

“I would really rather not.”

The Dementor’s voice is strong inside Percy’s head. ***You must tell me, so I may assess the damage that it did for your soul to destroy another. I can see only the result, and I do not wish to guess at the cause.***

Percy contemplates asking Severus to leave, but of course, that is not a viable option for him. He can only begin to imagine what Severus would say if Percy dared such a thing. "I can't," he says in a last desperate effort to escape.

"What does it wish for you to do?" Severus says, stepping forward so that he is in line with Percy. He looks at the creature suspiciously, but his wand dangles from his fingers, as if to indicate that though he is not currently a threat, he could be very shortly.

Percy shakes his head, his cheeks burning, and his palms beginning to feel uncomfortably damp. "Nothing."

But Severus is not so easily deterred. "It wishes for you to relate what happened, does it not?"

Percy shakes his head weakly, but they both know that it is a denial of what must be done, rather than any meaningful protest. Severus regards Percy thoughtfully, and Percy feels trapped in his gaze. Perhaps if they had parted on better terms—*you did not love Tom*— Percy could stomach the idea of Severus standing silently while Percy retold his sordid tale. As it is, the idea is nearly unthinkable.

"Percy," says Severus, and his voice is full of pity. Percy swallows around a lump in his throat. No wonder Severus pities him, the pathetic, useless shell of a person that he has become, that he has always been. "I would like to hear what happened too, but I will not

force you to tell me." The older wizard hesitates himself and then adds, "I understand that it may be…trying."

Looking at Severus' sallow face, Percy feels a great wave of embarrassment burst out of the dam obstinately built inside him. How can he refuse to tell his story when he had told Severus' to everyone, without the other man's permission?

He turns away from Severus and looks only at the Dementor, who floats in front of him, nearly unmoving. The agelessness of the Dementor and its strange, menacing hood grounds Percy, or at the very least is easier to speak toward than Severus' all too familiar face.

His words are short and clipped, and he twists his fingers together for nearly the entire time that he is speaking. He says only the basics: that he had used the stone to enter his soul, and felt for Tom's soul and pulled him in too.

Percy can sense Severus' impatience, the dozens of questions he undoubtedly has, but the other wizard does not interrupt and Percy does not cease his slow, unsteady retelling.

"We went to Tom's soul first," he explains haltingly, describing as best he can the cold graveyard, the elemental howling of the winds, and the tear in the sky, "like a rift in the clouds, where all the stars were streaming toward, and the rest of the sky was dark and lonely."

He pauses, waiting for either Severus or the Dementor to interject, but both are silent, waiting for him to go on.

"Tom, he screamed at me to *go away*," Percy admits painfully. "I managed to get us in *my* soul this time. It was…Hogwarts, as it had been in the past. Tom and I spoke…" Percy gathers up his courage and reveals, "I asked him, if he wanted to heal himself, if he regretted what he had done."

The Dementor stirs visibly. ***And did he?***

Percy pauses, his lips slightly open, as he recalls those taut final moments.Tom had not said anything explicitly, and Percy begins to explain that, but then he stops himself before the words are anything more than a gust of air between his lips. "No," Percy replies, and the words feel like a betrayal, hanging in the air between them with a terrible finality. "No, he didn't."

"Potter asked the Dark Lord the same thing," Severus says quietly. "What is the significance of regret, in this context?"

From Severus' involuntary flinch, Percy guesses that he too hears the Dementor's voice in his head. ***One's soul is constantly changing,*** the Dementor intones thoughtfully. ***To kill without cause, to harm another's soul—these acts harm your own soul, at times irrevocably. It is said that true contrition can repair this damage, though I have never seen it done.***

Severus looks rattled to have heard from the Dementor. Percy can feel the unease wafting off the other man as acridly as he can feel sweat collecting under his own armpits. To spare them

both, Percy continues. "A candle appeared in the space between us. I—I do not know why. I did not call for it specifically." He pauses again, but the Dementor does not jump in with a helpful explanation of what Percy's soul had conjured with its last strength. Haltingly, he explains how he had *felt* for Tom's soul and wrapped it, as best he could, around the candle.

"Why?" Severus interjects impatiently, and Percy can only shrug helplessly. As with much of his interactions with Tom, he had been acting on instinct, with a mind half-blurred by his proximity to Tom, his own confusion and conflicting desires.

"And then I blew it out," Percy concludes. He stares intensely at the Dementor, as if hoping the creature can see between his words without him having to say the rest out loud. "I thought I was…killing myself, and in turn, killing Tom. I do not know why I survived."

Severus hisses in a breath, and when Percy glances at him, his face is drawn and angry. Percy quickly returns his attention to the Dementor, who cocks its head as it looks at him. Then, a motion; he extends his hand, but this time, instead of seeming to survey Percy, he turns his hand over so that his palm is facing the ceiling. In his palm is the stone.

“I can’t,” says Percy, looking at the small, grey stone with trepidation. “I can’t.”

You can.

“I *can’t*,” he insists, and to his horror, he feels something like tears burning down the back of his throat. Swallowing, Percy tips his head up and stares angrily at the Dementor. “I can’t.”

His magic aside, could Percy bear to stand inside his own soul, to see the blackened dust on the walls and the words dripping in blood outside the Chamber, to see all that he is, and all that he’s failed to be?

The Dementor seems to exhale angrily, the rotten smell of sour eggs wafting over them. Percy wrinkles his nose automatically but otherwise does not react. He is no longer a wizard; he no longer needs to understand what is inside his soul. The Dementor cannot scare him.

Your soul is damaged*,** the Dementor says, and perhaps his irritation with Percy accounts for the clipped, short nature of his words as he delivers this news. ***The sliver of soul that you destroyed had maintained ties to you, and you destroyed that part of your soul when you killed it.

“What is it saying?” Severus interrupts. Percy barely hears him; his heart has begun to beat erratically, and Severus seems very far away from him.

The Dementor ignores him. ***At the moment of death, you split your own soul instead, so that part of you remained in this world***, he says mercilessly. ***The magic from this split is what destroyed the sliver of soul that you were battling.***

The ceiling seems suddenly to be further than it was before, and Percy’s tailbone has begun to smart. Only a second later, he realises that he’s fallen to the ground, sat heavily down as his legs refuse to support him any longer. From here, he can see the space under the Dementor, where the edges of its long, ragged cloak brush the floor, and he wonders

nonsensically if the Dementor has feet, or if it is merely a head and a pair of arms, covered by the fabric.

Robes rustling. Severus bends on one knee and holds onto Percy's chin, tipping it up, so that Percy stares unseeingly at Severus' dark, quizzical eyes. "Shock," the other man says, but the word barely registers with Percy. "What did you say to him? I order you to tell me." Perhaps the Dementor begins to speak to Severus; Percy does not notice, the sounds around him muted, as if he were underwater.

I wish for us to be free, thinks Percy, as he'd thought once before. It had been an insubstantial wish, an embarrassing wish, a non-specific wish, a wish that by all accounts should have resulted in their shared death. Perhaps a reunion in the afterlife, if an afterlife exists, or perhaps just peace, as their magic went back into the world, to linger at the tops of the trees in the Forbidden Forest and run alongside the creek, to materialise in Hagrid's giant pumpkins and spark into a Levitation Charm inside a first year classroom. Percy had planned to wish for something else, but at the very end, that had been all that he had been able to muster, lost inside the haze of pain and agony and a deep-seated sadness, the echo of Tom's lips on his, the feeling of his magic slowly ebbing away.

Free.

Percy thinks of Crouch, the elder, and that awful night where Percy had not known whether he'd killed the man in a moment of weakness. He'd *shoved* with his magic and Crouch had flown off him, crumpled on the ground, but Percy had not killed him, though he died merely hours later, and some would argue, essentially by Percy's own hand. He thinks of Crouch and he thinks of how pathetically relieved he had been, all of eighteen *(thirty one)* years old, to know that despite it all, he was not a killer, at least not instinctively, at least not without cause.

He thinks of his fear, that first detention with Severus, his soul like a dandelion in the wind, small bits of it tearing off. He thinks of his savage gladness when he had killed Bellatrix, the strange, arresting shame when he'd killed the Muggle, the revulsion that rose inside him when he watched the Dark Lord kill a small child over a Samhain fire.

Percy had spent the last night of his life refusing to tally his rights and his wrongs. He had thought that he had left his final mark on the world, that he had made the choices that he'd had to make, that he would allow himself to be judged by whatever came after. But he had been asking himself the wrong questions. He had not thought to wonder whether he had gone irrevocably to the Dark, whether his soul was worth saving, whether his life was worth living. He had thought only to wonder about the acts that he'd inflicted on the world, the lives saved or taken, not about his own soul, his own goodness. He had not spared a thought for his own redemption, his own contrition. Imagine, the irony of him offering to help Tom heal, when his own soul was damaged, frayed, soon to be split.

In his last wish, he had wished for freedom, for he and Tom. His magic, or his soul, or his mind, or whatever it was that made decisions for him, had reared its ugly head and performed a crude facsimile of the Horcrux ritual. Many years ago, he had read *Evil Moste Fowle* and thought to himself with a sort of sick curiosity that he could imagine the particulars of the

ritual. Well, he must have retained that knowledge, somewhere deep inside him, for his natural instinct had been to split his soul forever.

Perhaps his soul is like Tom's, a scream in the sky, an unending, unceasing scream of helpless anger. Perhaps he cannot enter his soul because he has damaged it beyond repair. He is not free, as Tom had not been free, nor the Dark Lord. He was bound by the chains of his own evil, and he had nobody to blame but himself, the rottenness at the very core of his being.

Faintly, Percy becomes aware that he is moving through the air. Severus has levitated him and is settling him against the wall, where he slumps, his eyes wide and horrified. Why was he even alive? What kind of life—half life, simulated life, corrupted life—was he now living? He is the Dark Lord, subsiding off unicorn blood, he is Tom, ripping his soul in half with his own hands, he is Voldemort, his laughter high and shrill over an open flame as the stench of bodies filled his nostrils.

Percy throws up and barely notices the acrid smell of vomit before Severus vanishes his mess.

"Percy," Severus says urgently, his face filling Percy's frame of vision. Percy looks at Severus' face, the dark bags under his eyes, the long, hooked nose, the yellow tint to his skin that betrays Severus' inability to eat vegetables at regular intervals or dose himself with one of the many rejuvenating potions he can make without a recipe. Severus' eyebrows are dark and bushy, and they draw together anxiously, a dark line carved into the skin on his forehead. His lips are small and pursed, but a surprisingly delicate shade of pink, and Percy stares at the unexpected splash of colour on Severus' face and bursts into tears.

It feels like he alone is without recourse, like he alone has been punished, that he alone is living a life without colour, without meaning. "I shouldn't be alive," he chokes out, and this sets him off again. He is not even embarrassed, though he ought to be. What could he do that is worse than what he has already done?

The Dementor hovers closer, but Percy feels numb. He does not hear Fred's voice, or his mother's, not even as the Dementor comes close enough to Percy to displace Severus and take his place in front of Percy.

You are not a Horcrux, he says, and the small tinge of worry that Percy hears in his voice makes Percy cringe into himself. Even the Dementor pities him. ***You have sacrificed part of yourself to rid the world of a great evil.***

"Don't pretend like I've done a good thing," Percy bites out. He wipes his hand savagely across his face. "The good thing to do would have been to die."

"Souls can change," says Severus, urgently, and Percy blinks despite himself in surprise. "Didn't you tell me that? All of your talk about Unbreakable Vows and soul-sucked humans."

Souls can indeed change. They change throughout your lives. I have seen it before, many times.

Percy had said the same thing to Tom. Yet— "But I told Tom, at the very end, that he was irredeemable," Percy says pathetically. "That his soul was damaged. That is why I k-killed him."

Severus understands at once what Percy is trying to say. "Just because you *can* change does not mean that you will," he says severely. "I did not change for many years. Albus certainly did not, though he must have, at least once in the past, when he turned from Grindelwald. You did not condemn Tom without cause, Percy. You gave him every opportunity to change his ways, and he chose otherwise."

Percy thinks of that great rift in the sky, the millions of stars streaming sadly and wearily toward the bleak nothingness that lay beyond. Then he looks at the Dementor, feeling the cold paint on the wall behind him steady him, seeping through his wizarding robes. He is still crying, or perhaps his face is merely still wet, and his voice shakes terribly as he asks, "I thought souls were not magic, but you said otherwise. What would make the soul change, otherwise?"

Souls are not Wizarding magic, the Dementor corrects. ***But souls are composed of the type of magic that exists in all creatures and in the world.***

"Elemental magic," says Severus, who must have heard this last himself.

"The wind," Percy says despite himself, his voice steadier. "In Tom's soul. I…I recognised it, from the caves."

Even those without Wizarding magic have this magic inside of them. The Dementor seems to sink closer to the floor, so that the cloak folds under it, and its head is closer in level to Percy, though Percy still has to crane his head up to see fully. ***This is the magic that is released when creatures die.***

This is so fascinating that Percy forgets about his tears almost entirely for a second. He gapes at the Dementor, feeling his brain slowly, painfully whir back into thought. So Muggles do have magic, or some type of magic, but not a *magical core.* He thinks of the Muggle that he'd killed, the golden flames of magic sparking in his blood. If there are two types of magic, entirely distinct…it would explain much of the contradiction in magical theory, much of what confused Percy about souls. Tom had been right, that souls were magic, but Percy had been right, too. And the transformative forces between magic, the properties of resonance and congruence—he thinks of McGonagall, removing the air from the classroom as his basilisk surges through the air, he thinks of a funeral boat moving slowly through the water, he thinks of his parents and their magic like the steady heartbeat of the green earth, of dragons wheeling through the air.

"Could he repair his soul?" Severus demands of the Dementor. "Could he utilise this magic, somehow, and use it to heal himself?"

For the first time, the Dementor seems to shrink back into himself. ***I do not know***, he admits, and Percy suddenly sees him as a being, not merely an ageless repository of wisdom, a being with Dementors in his line, with imperfect knowledge. ***We are guardians of the dead, shepherds of the souls once they leave their bodies.***

Severus' voice thins to its harshest snap. "Can you find out?"

I—I can try. A stutter, almost, before the Dementor tips its head up and regards Percy. ***I can try, young wizard.***

"Then do so." Then Severus turns back to Percy, whose head has begun to clear slightly. "You are not a Horcrux," he says firmly. "You have damaged your soul—but so have I, haven't I?"

"What—what did you do?" Percy blinks at Seerus, feeling himself slowly come back to his body. He feels his pulse beating in his fingers and a cramp in his left leg, and it is odd, really, to feel such physical sensations after such a shock. Percy is almost surprised to feel himself alive and in a body, as if he had already died and returned as a ghost.

"I've murdered nearly a dozen people," Severus says with excruciating precision, his black eyes boring into Percy's brown. "My potions have likely killed dozens more. To kill is to harm your soul; we both know this to be true, as we have always known."

"To kill without cause," Percy protests. He flicks a gaze to the Dementor, but the Dementor has returned to his full height and is silently watching them. "You did not kill without cause."

"My soul is likely as damaged as yours," Severus continues harshly. "And Albus' too, and even Minerva. Alastor has killed, and Scrimgeour, and I would fancy even your Nymphadora. Certainly your brother Charlie, who saved a family of five from an ambush. Perhaps all of our souls are as damaged as yours."

"But—" Percy struggles to sit up straighter, trying to force his mind into some semblance of a rebuttal.

"I suppose that you think you are *special* because you did it to yourself, in the privacy of your own soul," says Severus with a bitter laugh. "I can assure you that while your knowledge of souls is perhaps unique, you are not special, Percy Weasley. You have the same marks on your soul as many of your friends and the same mark on your arm as I do."

"I did it by *instinct—"*

"You did it out of necessity, with the last of your strength," snaps Severus, and Percy shuts his mouth automatically with a click. "*You are not Tom*, Percy, though for a time I know that you longed to be. Your idiocy has always blinded you to the qualities you possess that Tom lacked."

"I don't even have my magic, Severus," Percy argues back hotly. "I've lost my magic, I've ripped apart my soul, and even my own family is too ashamed or disgusted of me to visit. What kind of life could I lead? Who would want to associate with me? There is no purpose to my continued living, Severus, and we both know this."

"*If I were to ask one thing of you, it would be to live*," Severus says, his voice heavy with irony, and Percy flushes angrily as he recognises his own words. "You bloody idiot. There are four possibilities ahead of us: you can regain your magic, but not your soul; you can regain

your soul, but not your magic; you can regain both; or you can regain neither. You deserve to live, Percy, despite any of these outcomes. Do not tell me that you survived Tom Riddle only to end yourself over this infantile guilt."

"And what about you?" Percy counters, his heart beating combatively and angrily in his chest, like a caged animal throwing itself against its bars. "You were ready to die. How is your redemption going, Severus? Have you admitted that you deserve to live too?"

"My sins are my own."

Percy laughs, and he does not recognise the sound. "Give me a break, Severus. You are as capable of change as you claim I am. So you were an idiotic child and a prideful wizard. So your soul is damaged by the deaths you caused. How can you tell me that I deserve to live as —as a *monster*, when you do not say the same for yourself?"

Severus is silent. Percy glares at him angrily, his chest heaving, and then looks back to the Dementor, who inclines his head when he sees Percy's attention.

I must return to my people and to our gathering, the Dementor tells Percy, ***but I will not forget my promise to you.***

"You can forget it," Percy says tiredly. "I can't help you with your vow, not now."

I once told you that even if it took many lifetimes for us to arrive at a solution, it would be sufficient for me to know that we began the process, the Dementor says sternly, and with a hint of humour. ***I ask that you not give up so easily, and in return I will investigate matters of the soul that my people have not seen in many generations.***

"You'd better," promises Severus, darkly.

The Dementor holds out the stone, again, and Percy reaches out with a trembling hand to take it. ***You can***, the Dementor says softly, his voice barely echoing in Percy's head. ***But it is up to you whether you will.***

Percy does not thank the Dementor again, but something passes between them as the Dementor bows his head and then turns to float away through the walls. Something like encountering the same soul and seeing it for what it was. Something like a shared recognition of character, of purpose: families to guard, vows to break, an impossible task to tackle with only the slimmest chances of success.

To Percy's surprise, Severus takes a seat next to him, leaning against the wall. This close to Severus, Percy can smell the characteristic spicy scent of the cleaning solution that Severus uses to disinfect his equipment. It reminds Percy of Hogwarts, and he feels his traitorous eyes well again with tears, though he tries to blink them away.

"You are correct," says Severus finally. His body besides Percy is surprisingly warm, for the Bat of the Dungeons; Percy can feel his heat emanate in the small sliver of wall between them. "It is inconsistent for me to demand something of you and not apply it to my own life."

“So what are you saying?” Percy asks tiredly. He wraps his hands around his knees, drawn up to his chest, a position he had taken many times in the middle of the night, unable to sleep, sitting half-upright in bed as Tom shifted in his portrait outside.

Severus shrugs his shoulders, causing one to bump just infinitesimally against Percy. “I have cleaned my house,” he says, nonsensically. Percy frowns, and Severus hastens to continue. “I know that the grime—bothered you, when you were there last.”

“Congratulations.”

Percy can feel Severus’ eye-roll as vividly as if he’d turned his head to see it. “I was informing you, you impudent brat, so that you may take that into consideration when I offer you my guest room, on the ground floor.” Speaking more quickly, as if afraid Percy will interrupt, Severus says, “I do not believe it healthy for you to remain in Grimmauld Place alone. I will give you the privacy and space that you require.”

Percy turns his entire body to face Severus, who studiously avoids his gaze. “You’re offering for me to *live with you?”*

“I thought it may be preferable,” Severus says stiffly. “You may reside there as long as you wish. I live in a Muggle neighbourhood, so there are many facilities that would be accessible to you; my house is well-warded, and most people that knew its location are dead; and we may oversee each other’s…progress, as it were, over these next few months.”

“You want us to *oversee each other’s progress?”* Percy asks incredulously, the last of his tears drying on his face with this new, unexpected proposition. “What are you envisioning, that we’ll sit around the fire and take turns reporting on how *damaged* our souls feel?”

“We will conduct research,” snaps Severus, his voice cold, “and compare notes as we determine whether it is possible to re-ignite a deadened magical core and heal a damaged soul with elemental magic. But if you would prefer to waste away the rest of your life sitting in silence with a decrepit house elf, by all means, be my guest.”

Percy shuts his mouth, as he considers this. For the first time since he’d awoken without magic, Percy allows himself to consider a future beyond the day by day realities of living at Grimmauld. He is merely thirty four *(twenty one),* to be thirty five in just a few short days. He had not thought it possible to plan for the realities of living another year, let alone the rest of his life.

Suddenly, the prospect of living at Grimmauld Place until he becomes as Kreacher, a creature of the house, unable to leave—it fills him with a sickening anxiety, and he glances up at Severus, whose face is closed and forbidding, half-shielded by his hair.

“No,” he says, clearing his throat when the word struggles to emerge. “No. I do not wish for that. I…thank you, Severus, for the offer. I would…appreciate the company, provided that Tonks and Draco may visit on occasion.”

“You may decide who visits you, though I will require they will not reveal the location of my residence,” Severus says, half a grumble, half a concession. “I draw the line at more than two

Weasleys at a time."

Percy barks out a laugh. "I do not think that will be a concern."

Severus snorts. "Your family are all idiots, but I believe we have both always known that," he informs Percy, who smiles despite himself. Then, he pauses, and Percy tenses automatically, his body registering a threat, or perhaps a surprise. "Percy, I…"

"Since when do you call me *Percy?"* Percy demands, when Severus trails off mid-sentence, clearly unable to form whatever words he had been searching for last. Percy tries for a joke, the words feeling unfamiliar on his lips. "You only call me that when you want something."

Severus quirks his lips. "I do want something," he says, echoing Percy's earlier words. "I…I do not trust easily, and it…was difficult to bear, when I thought you were dead." He avoids Percy's eyes. Percy looks at the floor, cursing his traitorous complexion. "I do not wish to lose the only person whose company I find…tolerable."

"Thanks," Percy says dryly, though the words bloom inside him, warm and surprisingly steadying. He wipes his face again and then pulls himself to his feet. His body aches, as if he'd run a great distance, rather than collapsed in tears on the ground.

Severus is kind, or uncomfortable, enough not to mention them. "Let us go to Grimmauld, and you may collect your things," he says. "Do you…wish to return to your flat?"

"Not yet," Percy says immediately, though he knows that he is being foolish, and Tonks has boxed most of his things. He does not think can bear it.

Severus does not force him to explain. "Do you wish to remain at Grimmauld for a few days?"

Percy shakes his head. Now that he has begun to think about it, he wants to leave as quickly as possible, before it is his head mounted to the wall, or his feet dragging through the hallways. "No," he says with emphasis. "I need to get out of there."

Percy casts one last gaze around the room, where so much has occurred. Then his hand goes to the small, grey stone in his pocket, and he squeezes it tightly. He will need to think over what he learned, but he cannot deny that something in his heart feels lighter, though he has every reason to be mired in despair.

Well, you have time, he tells himself, submitting mutely to a Disillusionment Charm so that he may leave the Ministry unobserved. *You don't have magic, and you don't have a full soul, but you've got nothing but time, now.*

It's a strange thought, and something inside Percy's stomach flips uncomfortably as he follows Severus out of the room. But something else inside him feels—hopeful, which is odd, and uncomfortable, but not entirely unwelcome.

DECISIONS (2/3)

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who weighed in on the last chapter! As I've said before, I've really enjoyed writing Percy, or my take on Percy, and I am glad to hear that many of you enjoy reading him, as insufferable as he can be.

I...think I may have two chapters left after this, rather than one. I hope that you continue to find this interesting, even though we are merely dealing with the aftermath of the war, and Percy's attempts to deal with everything.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: DECISIONS (2/3)

1998— (Percy is 22 & 35, Severus is 37, Harry is 18, and society is putting itself back together)

Living with Severus is—strange. For all that Percy has shared his memories with Severus, and cried in front of him, and plotted with him secretly to destroy a Dark Lord, even having Severus assist him in magically packing his things from Grimmauld feels intensely uncomfortable, like they are feigning understanding of a foreign language together. Severus stands in the corner, his face impassive, while Percy points out reluctantly what needs to to be folded and resized: his robes, still crumpled; the clothes in the dirty hamper, which Percy has not yet surrendered to Kreacher to clean; the boxes from his flat, still shrunken and unopened, though Tonks had repeatedly offered otherwise; Hermes and his cage.

“I can cover my expenses, of course,” Percy says with an embarrassed cough as Severus hands him the miniaturised trunk. Hermes will have to find his way to Severus' house, though Severus had not anticipated any trouble. Andromeda has presumably been paying for his continued existence, but the one time Percy had gathered the courage to raise the topic to her, she had given him a withering look and he had returned, abashed, to the silence they typically shared.

“I have the Philosopher’s Stone,” replies Severus, turning away from Percy, but not before Percy spies the small quirk of his lips, providing the slightest veneer of normality over their otherwise awkward façade. “I do not think either of us will want for wealth, at least until we decide what to do with it. I daresay Flamel can do without it for a few decades more.”

Percy snorts in surprised amusement before he can remember to be uncomfortable, and on the strength of that miniscule interaction he reaches for one of the silver-framed photographs of Regulus—slicked back hair, Head Boy badge, nervous, proud smile—and slides it into his pocket, daring Severus to react. But the other man says nothing, and Percy holds onto the frame in his pocket with one hand as he follows Severus out of the room to bid goodbye to Grimmauld and approach the Apparation point. Before he leaves the room, he turns and looks back.

Tom stares at him from the wall of newspaper clippings, and Percy gives him a long look, safe in the knowledge that Severus is halfway down the stairs and cannot see his expression. So much had occurred in this room; so much had not. Percy had considered removing the papers, but it seems fitting to leave them there, at least for now, a testament to Regulus' quiet, unpublished bravery. He leaves them also to stand in solidarity with the ghost of Sirius Black, or whatever may still linger in the dust of the room. He hopes that the Black brothers, wherever they are, know that the Dark Lord is dead.

Downstairs, Percy is surprised to see the suggestion of tears in Kreacher's large, bulbous eyes when Percy stops by the kitchen to bid the elf goodbye and to thank him for his efforts to spark Percy's dormant appetite. He's far more surprised to feel the force of the small, wrinkled body as Kreacher flings himself at his leg, enveloping it in an unexpected embrace.

Severus' wand is in his hand before Percy can look up, wide-eyed and helpless, but he lowers it slowly when Percy pats Kreacher gingerly on the shoulder. "I'll visit," Percy offers tentatively, unsure what would cause the normally irascible elf to react to his departure with such sadness. Perhaps he, like Percy, cannot bear the thought of spending the rest of his life alone in Grimmauld. “Maybe Andromeda would allow you to…clean Severus’ house, for a change of scenery.”

“Dark Weasley Child is too kind,” sobs Kreacher, his large, hooked nose burrowing into Percy’s leg. “Kreacher thanks you, for your helps.”

Percy extricates his leg from Kreacher’s grasp and bends, placing one hand on the neatly folded tea towel that had replaced Kreacher’s customary grey wrappings, sometime during the war. “I thank you, Kreacher,” he says solemnly, ignoring the surprised scepticism that he already knows is passing over Severus’ face above them. “You have been very brave. Madam Black shared with me how you helped Master Regulus.”

Kreacher looks up at Percy, water-logged and incredulous at the idea of receiving praise. “You is too kind, Dark Weasley Child,” sniffs the elf, backing away from Percy and drying his eyes on the corner of his towel. “Kreacher is hoping you gets your magics back, but you can comes back, whenever you likes.”

Percy smiles wryly as he stands, his knee twinging painfully. “Thank you, Kreacher.”

Severus gives Percy a questioning look as they make their way to the Apparation point, but Percy waves it off. There will be plenty of time to share what Percy had learned from Tonks and Andromeda, and he has had a very long day, and he feels too tired to speak of Horcruxes and Regulus without fortification.

Severus had not been lying; he *had* cleaned the house. Percy is so surprised to see it that he stops halfway into the doorway, causing Severus to bump against him from behind. “It looks like a new house entirely,” Percy says, moving aside with a sheepish smile. “You must have been busy.”

“Perhaps bored would be a more accurate descriptor,” scoffs Severus, though Percy thinks that Severus may be pleased, judging by the faintly perceptible flush on the back of his neck, just visible over the stiff collar of his robes.

Percy is shown to a small room on the first floor. Severus’ mother’s study, or so the other man explains. Percy thinks that the barred room at the end of the hall was perhaps Severus’ parents’ bedroom, and so he is relieved to have a fairly neutral space to call his own. Inside the room, he encounters another surprise: the small wooden bed has nearly exactly the same brand of sheets that he’d purchased for himself for his flat.

When he turns to thank Severus for this surprisingly thoughtful gesture—thoughtful and surprising, given Severus must have come to the Ministry this morning without expecting to receive a houseguest the same day—the other man has of course disappeared. Percy spends most of his first afternoon in Severus’ house alone, unpacking his things and sitting quietly on the bed, but for some reason the solitude is not as lonely as it had been in Grimmauld, and is almost relaxing, if Percy would dare even think such a thing.

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The first few days are awkward, though of course, Percy *has* stayed there before (a fact he tries to remind himself of, whenever he feels too much like a guest in another's house). Percy tries to adhere to the schedule that Kreacher had set for him: breakfast at eight in the morning, lunch at noon, and supper at six exactly. After the first day, where Percy gingerly opens cupboards to find some food and fails to find anything that he knows how to prepare for himself, Severus takes to the kitchen thirty or so minutes earlier to cook a meal.

Severus also is quick to conscript Percy into service, which Percy supposes is his fault for hovering around uncomfortably during the process. Severus cooks the Muggle way, which Percy would have immediately suspected as pity, if Severus had not explained tersely that to cook with magic was to degrade the natural quality of the ingredients, and that cooking, much like Potions, was not an art that embraced shortcuts. Percy had eaten over a decade of his mother’s magical cooking and cannot say he precisely agrees with this perspective but says nothing.

And there *is* something satisfying about cooking by hand. It does remind him of Potions. So many ingredients cannot be prepared with magic that Percy had become quite used to slicing and dicing by hand, and Severus examines his diced carrots with as much scrutiny as if they had been flobberworms. The set of knives that Severus has in his kitchen is nearly identical to the one he carries around the lab, and he uses many of the same techniques—utilising all

five senses, adjusting the heat, choosing from the wide pots and pans with care—to great effect.

Perhaps by mutual agreement, they begin to make more and more elaborate meals, disdaining the standard oatmeal or scrambled eggs that Percy had been served from Kreacher and diving into far more complicated endeavours. On the third day, Percy digs up a French cookbook in Severus' small but formidable library—it says *Eileen Prince* in a schoolgirl's hand, and Severus goes still when he sees it—and Severus seems to take the recipes as a series of personal challenges. Neither of them particularly *like* French food, but some of the recipes take hours to prepare, which seems as good of a reason as any for attempting them. The other advantage to cooking is, of course, that they do not need to speak, save for discussing the recipe, or communicating the progress of their separate stations.

But even cooking delicate soufflés and tarts cannot fill the entire day. Adding grocery shopping to the list of tasks does provide them something to do in the morning: they walk each day to the local grocery store, something that Percy has to admit to Severus in an undertone is an entirely new activity for him, buying the smallest quantities of food that they can find, so they are forced to return anew the following day. Percy can behead, de-feather, and debone a chicken (this last skill he demonstrates to Severus over the second weekend of their shared residence), but he's never been to a *shop* to buy his food, let alone a shop with wheeled baskets and beeping Muggle machines and tidy, organised shelves with paper cartons and bunched vegetables. His mother grew most of the vegetables that they ate and would go down to the weekly market for whatever else they needed, like rashers of bacon or big tubs of flour, which his mother would store in shrinkable containers with strong preservation charms. Percy learns more about Muggle money, which is interesting; all those bits of paper, though Severus has some sort of playing card which seems to allow him to purchase on credit. Percy retells the story of his struggle with a Muggle telephone to Severus, who seems surprised to hear that Percy had leveraged a Muggle library to track down Dennis Bishop.

(Percy feels—proud, in a strange way, to relate his triumph, both in tracking down the orphanage and in weaselling the truth out of Bishop. It is a strange reminder too that for as much as they spoke during the war, there is much left to share, much of their activities that they only caught glimpses of through quick, curt messages on a page).

They read when there is nothing else to do. Percy works his way through a weighty tome on the goblin wars, and Severus reads the latest Potions journals, flipping quietly through them and occasionally making notes. Severus chooses the chair closest to the shelves, while Percy claims a large armchair that he drags close to the fire. Next to Percy's armchair is a small three-legged table made of dark brown wood. After the first week passes, a book appears, sitting quietly and waiting for Percy's acknowledgement, but he finds it easy to pretend it does not exist. He does not return the book to the shelf nor open it, nor even move the stool further from him, as if the book will only exist when he touches it, or pays it any mind.

Even with reading, they struggle to fill the day, and sometimes Percy wonders what had occupied Severus before Percy had moved in. For all Severus' surprise that Percy had been forsaken by his family, he does not seem to have very many friends either. Still, on the balance, Percy finds living with Severus to be a tremendously better experience than living at

Grimmauld Place, even if he receives a flurry of shocked letters when he writes to the few people who he deems worthy of learning about his new residence.

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AWARD NOMINATIONS LEAKED!

Percy would have set the newspaper on fire, if he could. Instead, he has to content himself with crumpling it savagely into a ball, though Severus summons it from him and smoothes it out so he can see the rest of the article.

"*Leaked*," Severus scoffs. "As if. Scrimgeour went straight to the press so that none of us could refuse the honour."

"What does it say?" Percy asks, eyeing the paper as if it were a dangerous beast.

"Oh, the usual." Severus skims the paper, opening it to read the rest of the article continued on the third page. Percy sees the photograph of their implausible group walking through the Ministry and wants to groan. Some enterprising photographer had grabbed a photo and likely sold it for a fat chunk of Galleons. "Potter is the boy hero our society does not deserve; I am a misunderstood spy; you are my junior and far inferior compatriot."

Percy gives Severus a black look that the other man ignores. "Did he give me a Third Class?"

"It does not say," Severus says. "The recipients are listed alphabetically, and the article encourages those interested to attend the gala on August 31."

Percy rolls his eyes and mutters dispiritedly, "Well, I suppose everyone will know I'm alive now."

And the article does have repercussions, of course. Percy receives letters from nearly everyone he'd ever known (with the notable exception of a few key people). Mariana writes him cheerfully that she'd known he wasn't half as much of a swot as he'd appeared, and Slughorn writes him to congratulate him on his successful deception, and Auntie Muriel writes him to demand that he explain everything to her fully whenever he deigned to visit his ageing aunt who may not live to see the rest of the year. Mathilda and Liam both write to inquire when he will be returning to the Ministry, and he receives a flurry of angry and confused mail inquiring after his clear manipulation of the Minister and his motives in collaborating with the Dark Lord and/or the Order. Ginny, Fred, George, Bill, and Charlie all send him brief notes, though their names are all in the paper as well, Weasley after Weasley listed in small black print—Percy thinks that his family seem all equally surprised to hear of each other's exploits, given how involved each of them had been, in their own way—and he responds to each politely. Cedric writes, and Percy writes back, congratulating him in return. Henry does not write, nor does Sonali, nor does Theodora, nor Tobias Greengrass.

Well, Tobias Greengrass does not *write*, but he does manage to find Percy at Severus' house, despite the wards. Severus' face when he sees Tobias striding furiously up the path would have been comical, if Percy hadn't been feeling like he wanted to throw up at the sight of Landon's father. Perhaps due to the rich fare that he and Severus have been concocting in the kitchen, Percy's stomach has not felt particularly settled, of late, and even the smallest disturbance can threaten to set him off again. Ducking out of sight at the kitchen window, Percy grapples for the glass of water he'd left on the counter earlier and drinks as much of it as he can bear in a giant, ill-advised gulp that leaves him spluttering for air.

Creeping into the cramped corridor next to the kitchen, he hears the force with which Severus yanks the door open. Peering around the door, Percy can just make out the back of Severus' body, noting the stiffness in his shoulders and legs. So Severus had not invited Tobias, which is somewhat of a relief to Percy, given Severus had felt it necessary to force Tonks and Percy to reunite. "Lord Greengrass," sneers Severus. "What a pleasure to see you here."

"Professor Snape," Tobias says, cordially enough. Percy wishes he could see Tobias' face, to judge whether he is here for vengeance or merely for explanation. "My apologies for intruding on your private residence."

"How did you find it?" Severus demands rudely, ignoring the apology. Percy winces, remembering how Landon had stressed to him to use his very best manners on Tobias when possible. Tobias, much like Andromeda, had been properly raised with the Old Ways, a difficult upbringing to shake, despite how their lives may have changed as they aged.

"Minerva McGonagall provided me with a portkey. Rest assured that your wards held; I could not see the door until you opened it."

Percy would not want to be in the room when Severus confronts McGonagall, though he supposes it might be preferable to being in the room when Tobias confronts *him*. Why had Tobias thought it so urgent to speak to Percy that he had asked *McGonagall* for Percy's location? Why had McGonagall thought to send Percy to *Severus?* Granted, Percy would not have been surprised if the news had reached McGonagall by now that Percy had moved; he had let Andromeda know, formally thanking her and promising to repay her by month end, and he knew that McGonagall could still be communicating with Andromeda or Tonks or even Draco.

These thoughts are insufficient to distract Percy from the task at hand. As Severus steps aside unwillingly to let Tobias in, Percy flinches as he makes eye contact with Tobias for the first time. A strange, brittle smile crosses Tobias' face. "How fortuitous to find you hiding here."

Percy steps out of the doorway and begins the appropriate bow before he can stop himself, sweeping his hand out at chest level to apologise, and inclining his head as would befit a Lord. Part of him wants to hesitate when he realises his mistake, but he straightens up without pause. Better for Tobias to think him presumptuous for continuing to use the pureblood wizarding ways than for him to be insulted because Percy forwent them entirely.

Tobias inclines his head back, which could be an insult, or a reference to Percy's non-magical status. Regardless, the tension between them only crystallises as Percy leads Tobias mutely into Severus' parlour and inquires politely whether Tobias would like tea.

“No, thank you,” Tobias says, settling into the chair that Percy normally uses with a proprietary air. Percy evaluates the other man’s robes and notes that he is wearing his signet ring. Tobias is here as the Head of House, and so refusing the tea is most definitely an insult. Percy compresses his lips but does not comment.

Percy settles himself in Severus’ chair. Severus hovers in the doorway but Percy motions him aside with a jerk of the head. Though it is Severus’ house, and by all rights Severus ought to lead the conversation, he knows that Tobias is here for him.

Severus leaves with a scowl that promises further retribution, though Percy would bet money that he left an eavesdropping charm in his place. Percy would not dare to mention such a charm to Tobias nor is he capable of dismantling it in his current…condition, so he can only hope that Tobias lifted privacy wards of his own. Or, Percy amends in his head as he turns to face Tobias, that Severus will be circumspect enough not to barge in angrily when Tobias inevitably accuses Percy of murdering his son.

The expression on Tobias’ face is—familiar, strangely so, though Percy has never been in any sort of similar situation with the other man, of course. Something about the slight raise of the right eyebrow, the clear, bright eyes, the challenging set to the jaw…

“Lord Greengrass,” Percy says politely. The last time Percy had seen Tobias, he had invited him to join him and Landon at their family home in France, but the death of Tobias’ son looms between them, erasing any of the meagre goodwill that Percy may have built up before. Percy prepares himself for an emotional confrontation and then decides he may as well get it over with. Waste not, want not. “Please let me offer my condolences to you in the wake of Landon’s death. I mourn Landon greatly and I am saddened for you and Lady Greengrass.”

Not quite said in the Old Ways, but Percy still does not know what words he is allowed to use, and so he only uses his own. They are stilting and awkward, but they are genuine, and he sits back in Severus’ chair and waits for Tobias to respond to them.

Unbidden, the memory of Landon floats into Percy’s memory; Tobias’ expectant, challenging expression is reminiscent of his son’s, many years ago, waiting for Percy’s apology. *This had better be good.* Percy swallows past a pang of guilt. Why had he been such an arse in school, his mind always wrapped up in his own problems, unable to pay attention to his classmates long enough to give their childish squabbles and slights the attention that they deserved, at the time? Of course in comparison to Percy’s battle against the Dark Lord, Landon’s hurt feelings or Alexander and Oliver’s joking arguments or even Mariana and Henry’s timid, burgeoning relationship were mere trifles, foibles. But Percy wishes now he had gone to Landon’s bloody ball, had danced with Theodora or helped Alexander spell the ruffles off his robes.

Tobias blinks twice, his lips pursuing tightly before relaxing marginally. Likely he had not expected Percy to jump straight to the point so quickly, but Percy is not a Slytherin, and there is nothing to be gained from prevaricating. “I had wondered whether you truly mourned him, given that you ignored my invitation to the funeral,” Tobias coolly responds. “I did not see you at the funeral, and your own classmates had much to say of the wizard you were becoming.”

“Yes,” Percy concedes, straightening his back. “Henry confronted me, which was foolish. I had to strongly dissuade him from speaking of things not suitable to be heard by the other ears in the Ministry. I apologise for my strong actions but I believe they were the correct course, given the dangerous constraints.”

Tobias regards Percy without mercy. “I heard you tortured him.”

Percy swallows but does not back down. Tobias deserves the truth, plainly and honestly spoken. “So I did, and I cannot regret my actions if they impressed upon him the need for secrecy and discretion that I’d hoped they would.” Then he adds, a plaintive edge creeping into his voice, “Severus and I prevented the Dark Lord from turning his attention to the funeral. Otherwise you all might have been killed.”

“I did hear a rumour that you and the good professor were working together,” Tobias continues. Percy tries to collect himself; whether Tobias has accepted Percy’s excuse for torturing Henry is not clear, but either way, Percy does not want to dissolve into worthless pleading. “Although I admit I was not sure whether you both were merely acting opportunistically, preparing yourself for either victor.”

“Lord Greengrass,” snaps Percy, the affronted steel in his tone driving out the earlier weakness, “I thank you not to insult my host in his own home. Severus Snape acted with honour.” Then, softer, “I am sorry that I was not able to help Landon. I did not know of his participation in the escape routes until I learned belatedly of his death.” He swallows, but does not tear his eyes away from Tobias, who seems to fold into himself at Percy’s apology, the self-righteous anger leaking out of him like air from an old bicycle tyre. Percy summons up any Gryffindor courage he may still possess and admits his darkest fear. “The Dark Lord had ordered me to investigate the escape routes, and I did not, Lord Greengrass. I had helped the Minister fake his death, and I knew he may be involved, along with Nymphadora Tonks and countless others. I thought that by delaying on answering the Dark Lord’s call I would be providing them with extra safety and time. In reality, I believe my lack of action incited the Dark Lord to investigate himself, which resulted in Landon’s death. It was my fault, and I admit to it freely…and with great sorrow.”

Tobias stares blankly at him, all sense of proprietary gone, and Percy has the odd notion that the sturdiness of the chair is the only thing that is preventing the venerable Greengrass heir from collapsing.

“He was my friend,” Percy adds into the silence, readying himself for a curse. “And I failed him when it mattered the most.”

Tobias sighs, the kind of slow, drawn-out sigh that is more like a scream, his eyes bright and staring. “I didn’t know either,” Tobias whispers hoarsely, each word wrung out of him to land dripping wet on the floor in a puddle of his regret. “He got an *internship*…all those long hours…”

“What…where was he working?” Percy asks hesitantly. He had not read the *Daily Prophet* article in its entirety.

Tobias smiles without humour. “He used his position within the Ministry to forge identity documents and authorise International Portkeys.” It is akin to a slap in the face for Percy. He hadn’t thought to forge documents, or do anything like that, and he’d had the Minister in his control, but Landon had always been clever in a way that Percy had not been. He’d gotten better marks than Percy in the first timeline, where Percy did not have the aid of extra private tutelage or extra years of schooling. “But I fear he did not do so with enough subtlety. Lady Daggleworth was apprehended, but Landon did not heed the warning; that was when I began to grow suspicious and began to plan for us to return to Britain.”

“I’m sorry,” Percy says again, without any sort of hope that it will mean anything to Tobias. “I…I did not even know my own brother was involved. I believe Landon’s courage saved his life, and I owe him a debt of great gratitude.”

Tobias looks at him evenly and then nods, a single, curt nod, as sharp as a stinging charm erupting from his wand. “I did not truly think you would have allowed him to continue, had you known,” the older man admits softly, and Percy feels awful all over again. His hand curls around an imaginary wand, tightening into his clammy palm. “But I suppose I was looking for someone to blame. Do you know…how he died?”

Percy hesitates but has to shake his head. “I can find out,” he promises Tobias, though he had been avoiding asking Scrimgeour or Severus for the truth, knowing that if the Dark Lord had killed Landon personally, it would have been…terrible.

“Scrimgeour told me it was a Killing Curse.” There is a sort of stark, awful humour in Tobias’ tone as he stares grimly at Percy. They both know it was not a Killing Curse.

“I will find out.” Tobias raises an eyebrow and Percy adds vehemently, “I will tell you the truth.”

They sit in tortured silence, staring down at the rug underneath their feet, before Tobias rouses himself. “I will take the tea now, if you are still offering it.”

Preparing the tea provides Percy something to do and allows him to escape the room, albeit briefly. When he returns, carrying the tea set by hand, Tobias has pulled himself together and is sitting straighter on the chair, looking around him with more interest. “So you are residing with Severus Snape. May I inquire how that occurred? Minerva merely mentioned that Severus would have the best chance of contacting you; I was not expecting to see you here today.”

Percy huffs out a small laugh and sets the tea set down gingerly on the low table between the chairs, manoeuvring around it to return to his seat. He leans forward and pours into Tobias’ cup and then his, and then he waits for Tobias to choose between the two, as is customary for a guest in a house, in case Percy had tried to poison one. Tobias picks up the cup closest to him and sips from it absently after casting a light cooling charm. No sugar, no milk. Percy does the same to his, sans cooling charm, and suffers through a burn at the edge of his tongue as a result.

“Severus and I worked closely together during the war,” Percy says by way of explanation. “After the war, my family has been…less than eager to house me themselves. My Aunt

Muriel offered, of course, but there have been certain…benefits to living with Severus that Auntie Muriel would not be able to provide."

"I am planning to visit Muriel, soon," Tobias says, taking another sip from his tea. "I am sure she would enjoy it if you accompanied me. But you say your parents did not wish for you to return home? Your youngest siblings are residing with your parents, are they not, along with Harry Potter and Hermione Granger?"

"If they are, nobody sought to inform me," Percy says, a tad bitterly, though the burn on his tongue dissuades him from taking another angry sip of tea. Well, he had assumed that Ginny was still at the Burrow, at least until she completed her NEWTs, depending on when she had planned to take them. He had not spared much thought to where Ron, Hermione, and Harry may be, though he supposes that he may have prevented them from staying in Grimmauld. Of course, after Sirius' awful death, he cannot imagine Harry would have wanted to stay in Grimmauld. If he had to have guessed, he would have said they had pooled their money and found a flat somewhere together, away from the madness, perhaps even in Muggle London where Harry could walk down the street without being followed by delirious fans.

Tobias frowns at him. "You have not been to your family home? Not since...the end of the war?"

Percy shakes his head mutely. How Tobias knew the details of where Harry and the rest were staying is a mystery, but a relatively benign one. Perhaps McGonagall had told him that too, or even Auntie Muriel.

"But your mother said that she has been visiting you, though not of late," Tobias continues, his brow furrowed. "You have not spoken of your brothers when she visits?"

"My *mother?"* Percy asks, incredulously, his hand tightening around the cup. "I have not seen my mother since March."

Tobias hesitates. "But when I spoke to her Sunday last, she told me that she had been visiting you."

"Well, that was a bloody lie," Percy scoffs and cannot bring himself to apologise for his rudeness. "No, I've not seen anyone in my family recently, save for my eldest brothers. Charlie is the one who worked at least nominally with Landon, though we have not…spoken of his work in the war."

"You have seen your youngest brother, at the Ministry," Tobias prompts. Percy shrugs, close-mouthed, unwilling to discuss the confrontation with the Minister. Tobias smiles quietly, giving Percy an evaluative glance. "You are a worthy heir to the Prewett name, you know."

Percy blinks. "Sorry?"

"You have the Prewett pride, as does your mother," Tobias comments dryly. "As well as the Prewett proclivity for magic. Do not judge your mother too swiftly, Percy. My guess is that she now regrets some of the harsh words she spoke to you during the war, when you were

unable to correct her assumptions of you, and does not know how to approach you to set the matter right."

Percy glowers at this advice, not asked for, not needed. So perhaps his whole family believed his mother was visiting him regularly, which would, he supposes, partially explain why they have not gone out of their way to see him.

"Oh, don't scowl at me," says Tobias with a small, pained laugh. "I knew your mother well, at one point. Or perhaps not *well*—Gideon and Fabian were always in their own private world—but I spent quite a few summers with them, and with your aunt Muriel as well. Molly was a stubborn child, much like another Weasley-Prewett I have met."

Percy always forgets that Tobias had been friends with his uncle. It is strange to think of his mother as a child; he pictures her like Ginny, stubborn and fierce, following the twins around for company. The image settles uncomfortably in his stomach.

"Why do you not go to her first?" Tobias continues, seemingly unaware that with every fibre of his being, Percy is silently pleading for him to be *quiet*. "You must agree that she had every reason to think the worst of you. In fact, I wager that the Dark Lord paid extra attention to your parents to test your loyalty. Her disappointment in you protected you."

"I know that," Percy bursts out angrily, unable to contain himself any longer. "I am not upset that she thought the worst of me when there was every reason to do so." Tobias raises a skeptical eyebrow, and Percy amends, "Well, I am still upset, I suppose, but I understand why it was necessary. But that is no excuse for her to not visit me, Lord Greengrass, and then to lie about it."

"Are you suddenly incapable of Apparation yourself?" Tobias inquires lightly. *One would think it within your considerable ability to post a letter.*

"I've lost my magic," Percy reveals savagely, and part of him delights in the shock that crosses Tobias' face, replacing the man's earlier condescension entirely. "I can't go bloody anywhere, which is why I'm living in a Muggle town. I can't even cast a cooling charm on my tea. Yes, my parents know of what has happened to me. So forgive me if I believe the onus should be on *them* to visit me, rather than the other way around."

"How—"

"A vow." Percy shakes his head and downs the rest of his tea in one angry gulp. He has nothing more to say to Tobias. "It does not matter. Needless to say, my life is very different now than it was before, Lord Greengrass."

"You lost your *magic?"* Tobias looks at Percy incredulously. "I did not think such a thing was possible."

"I swore on my magic to not harm Tom Riddle."

"Have you considered—"

“Lord Greengrass, my magic is my own concern,” Percy says bitingly. The stool next to Tobias’ seat remains still and inert, though Percy’s eyes are drawn to the book on top. The sight softens his tone, and he adds, “When I am ready to begin investigating what has happened to me, I shall contact you, should I need it. In the interim, I thank you not to interfere.”

“Calm yourself, boy,” Tobias says, but he settles back in his chair in apology. “When you are ready, I am available to help you with your research. You may avail yourself of my library. A vow.” He shakes his head, still staring at Percy with that cautiously surprised curiosity. “I am sorry, Mr. Weasley. I know how much your magic meant to you.”

Percy accepts the apology with a small shrug and grunt. Auntie Muriel would have slapped him about the head had she seen it, but Percy cannot summon up the necessary mental energy to respond properly. Tobias is the first person he had truly told, since the initial set of revelations, and it tires him.

“Before I leave, as I can tell you long for me to do, I have something left to say,” Tobias says, setting his tea cup down in its saucer so that nothing stood between him and Percy. Percy has the sense that Tobias has prepared these words. “Gideon was my best friend, as Landon was yours. When the war broke out, my father took me to France to escape the war, but Gideon wanted to stay and fight.”

Percy nods, caught up in the story despite himself. Of course his uncle had stayed; he was in the Order by then, presumably. Why had Tobias not been recruited by the Order? His last name? The threat of his uncle, one of the original Death Eaters?

“Gideon died,” Tobias continues, his voice hard. Percy swallows, though of course he had already known how their story had ended. “I had begged my father to allow Gideon to come with us, but my father said that we could not claim neutrality if we fostered known enemies of the Dark Lord. I wrote to Gideon to ask him to flee, but he told me he could not. My father took me away, so that I would not be tempted to stay and fight, and to ensure I not come to the attention of the Dark Lord. As I said to you before, I was prepared to do the same for my son.”

This sheds new light—and significance—on Tobias’ offer for Percy and his family to seek shelter in the Greengrass residence. Percy inclines his head in recognition, a gesture that registers visibly with Tobias and relaxes some of the thin lines near his mouth.

“I could never have imagined that you would have lived and my son would have died.” Tobias breaks off and intertwines his fingers, squeezing them tightly in his lap. “Not that I would have wished such a fate on you, of course, but because I thought I had taken every precaution in removing my son from danger.”

“He was a hero,” Percy says suddenly. “The Minister told me himself. He saved countless lives, Lord Greengrass.”

“I would have rather he saved none and remained with me.” Tobias allows a small, bitter smile to cross his face. “I suppose that makes me as evil as the Death Eaters, but it is the truth. You have had the fortune to live, Percy. Live perhaps without your magic, but live

nevertheless. Take it from a father; I would do anything to have my son back with me, magic or no. Your parents feel the same. Go to them; do not tarry any longer, and think of them with empathy, rather than hurt pride. It is a miracle that you survived."

I did not intend to survive. But Percy does not—cannot—say it out loud. To say such a thing to Tobias, to insinuate that he had chosen to die, that he had felt he had nothing left to live for…it is an affront to Landon's memory, and suddenly Percy understands that, whereas he hadn't before. For the first time, he reverses his position with Landon: imagines seeing Landon with a flock of Death Eaters, despite his parents' wishes; imagines Landon striding around the Ministry with a hard countenance; imagines attending Landon's funeral, knowing the other boy had chosen to die to defeat the Dark Lord; imagines reading about it in the paper, rather than hearing it from Landon himself. Percy feels immediately sick and furious with this imaginary Landon, at his arrogance, his selfishness, the futile anger that he would not have been able to help Landon, since Landon had not asked for help.

"Lord Greengrass," Percy says desperately, hating the bleak desperation that lingers around Tobias' shoulders like an enchanted cloud. "If I tell you something about Landon, you must keep it a secret, do you understand? I cannot…I cannot participate in a vow with you, and I will not ask you to swear it on your magic."

"I understand." Tobias regards Percy and then says firmly, "I swear on the honour of my son's life that I will keep it a secret."

Briefly, Percy tells Tobias of the Horcruxes, just the bare outlines of it, without delving into the specifics. Tobias has enough Dark magical theory to know what a Horcrux is without Percy's having to explain, a fact for which he is grateful. "He made three of the Founder's Artefacts Horcruxes: Hufflepuff's Cup, Ravenclaw's Diadem, and Slytherin's Locket," Percy explains softly. Tobias' face is stuck midway between horror and pained understanding. "I did not know until after I'd left Hogwarts, and of course I could not have told Landon. But please understand that we were able to find and destroy all three of them, largely aided by the research that Landon completed when we were still in school. Landon is a hero for his work with the refugees, of course, but he contributed meaningfully to the destruction of the Dark Lord's soul. You cannot tell anyone, but I thought…I thought that might provide you with comfort, Lord Greengrass."

Pained understanding wins its battle over horror; Tobias passes a hand over his face and looks dreadfully close to tears. Percy tenses, but Tobias manages to square away his emotions and look back up at Percy with nothing more than desperate, almost feverish eyes. "Thank you for telling me. I will not breathe a word to anyone, but it…does bring me comfort to know what Landon aided in."

Tobias does not have to say what they both know is true: Tobias would have traded the Horcruxes for Landon's life, had he been able. It is a strange thought, and one that lingers as Percy arranges a time for them to visit Aunt Muriel and then waves Tobias out. Percy had thought he had loved Tom—but what would he have traded to destroy the Horcruxes forever? Sometimes, particularly lately, when Percy thinks back to his betrayal of Tom, he reflects bitterly—regretfully, perhaps, guiltily, longingly?—that he would have bound himself to Tom, had Tom asked…but there *had* been limits to the costs that he would have been willing

to pay, and at the end of Percy's magical life, he had decided that he must honour his mission over Tom. Did that make him a better or worse person? Less capable or more capable of love?

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Some of the closure brought by Tobias' visit strengthens Percy enough that he manages a short note to Sonali, though not to Henry. Her response is brief but not cruel, impersonal yet informal, and does not hint at that last year of their tangential friendship, dozens of lunches together or study sessions in the library or their brief moments united in teasing Landon. Sonali merely thanks him for sharing with her what Landon had done in France and then congratulates him on his impending award. The letter leaves a strange, metallic taste in Percy's mouth; this was precisely why he had not wanted an award at all, let alone such a prominent one. Nobody should be thanking him, at least not when his positive actions (or at least, the positive actions that he can speak to in public) do not nearly *begin* to outweigh his negative actions (even when similarly only accounting for the publicly known ones).

Percy had *Imperiused the Minister*. He had passed information to Lucius as well as to McGonagall. He had presided over the Muggleborn trials and said nothing; his only contribution to their welfare was to ensure they were adequately fed and occasionally looked at by a Healer before he dumped them all unceremoniously in Azkaban. He turned the other way as Nott interrogated his colleagues; he answered the questions of the Department Heads, when they asked; he oversaw the closing of the Floo Network and the Portkey system. He tortured Theodora and Henry, insulted his father publicly, disdained the Order in the newspaper, wrote the Minister's incendiary speeches, drank the Death Eater's liquor and attended their parties, approved the design of the banners proclaiming *MAGIC IS MIGHT*, outed Liam as a Muggleborn, and was a sneering, supercilious arse to everyone he passed.

Percy does not know what he thinks is worse: that everyone who has congratulated him or otherwise noticed him as he passed in the street genuinely think that he is a hero, or that everyone privately judges him for the audacity of believing a few passed messages to the Order outweighed the whole gamut of inexcusable behaviour he had actively perpetuated. He does not know whether he would prefer for everyone to know the whole truth so that they could at least judge him fairly, or for nobody to ever learn even the smidgeon of the truth. Would he feel better, hailed as a hero or rotting in a cell in Azkaban?

Severus, it seems, would vastly prefer the latter, or so it seems to Percy, judging by the ferocity of Severus' angry mutterings every time the subject is raised. Severus has a very strict—yet unclear—description of what he ought to be doing to reach a true state of contrition, or so Percy surmises, watching his old professor go about his day. Severus holds himself to such an inflexible, unyielding structure of actions, schedules, and sentences that Percy sometimes thinks that being in Azkaban could bring a small measure of relief. At least there Severus would be free to *relax*, or at the very least confine his arena of control to a more manageable size. (There is an incident where Percy leaves out dirtied dishes one time too many, wherein Severus reacts as if Percy were smearing mud over his walls and thereby

creating an environment not conducive to mental peace, or something like that, given that Percy must surmise Severus' words from his icy, disdainful silence rather than from clear explanations of his innermost feelings).

So it is somewhat of a relief when Ginny writes to him and invites him to lunch. Percy does not particularly want to go to Diagon Alley, but even he cannot sit inside Severus' house the entire day for two weeks straight and not feel a little mad. (The alternative is to return to the deadened, foggy state of being that had taken him through three months at Grimmauld, but Percy cannot contemplate that, not after speaking to Tobias).

It is only when he arrives in Diagon Alley—brought by Draco, as Tonks could not help Percy during the day, and Percy had not wanted to ask Severus—that he realises that Ginny had, intentionally or otherwise, chosen the date of the Grand Re-Opening of Fred and George's shop. Percy and Draco arrive in the middle of a crowd and immediately flinch, Percy reaching for the stone and Draco for his wand. But despite their high-profile faces, nobody bothers to give them a second look; the crowds are surging toward the WWW shop, which is so bright and colourful that it is impossible to notice anything else.

Draco grabs the sleeve of Percy's robe and directs him to the opposite side of the street, where they linger at the edge of the crowd, both caught by the sheer spectacle of the party that the twins are throwing, spilling into the street, people leaning out of the windows of the shop and waving to their friends. When Percy turns to Draco, he sees an unguarded expression of delight on the younger boy's face, though when Draco notices Percy's attention he closes down immediately, scowling as if it were beneath him to attend such a childish event.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Percy asks, as if he hadn't seen either expression on Draco's face. The loud energy of the crowd is—jarring, to say the least, but Percy cannot help but be swept up a little in it too, particularly since nobody seems very interested in him. "The twins have always had a gift for this sort of thing."

Draco snorts, but he does not bite out a cutting comment, which Percy takes as agreement. It is oddly…*nice* to see Draco so taken by the spectacle. Percy does wonder, sometimes, if Draco has any friends anymore to spend time with other than Percy and Tonks. He has not asked, since his best guess would be no. Percy cannot imagine that Draco is any more popular with his peers than Percy is, which is somewhat ironic, given that they made what would seem to be opposite choices.

The new WWW shop is grand, even grander than the last. It is in the same location, but Percy had nearly destroyed the entire building in his attempt to get Lucius Malfoy's attention, and the twins have seemingly taken the opportunity to build the shop of their dreams. It towers above their heads, an absolute mad concoction of colour and light and noise, as mischievous and irrepressibly cheerful as the twins themselves.

When Percy slips inside with the rest of the crowd, Draco tagging at his heels, and sees his two younger brothers, one with an elaborate top hat and bright pink robes, one with a sparkling tiara and a velvet green suit, circling around each other gleefully as they walk their customers through the multiple floors of extravagant fun—he has to duck behind a cafe of fluffy purple beasts and take deep, calming breaths, Draco only seconds behind.

He hadn't—

He would never have—

Oh, Merlin. Oh, *Merlin.* Eleven years and he hadn't allowed himself to believe—

“No crying near the Pygmy Puffs,” says Fred firmly, and a second later, Percy feels himself being firmly lifted to his feet. His body feels limp, boneless.

George nods wisely, the top hat wobbling on his head. It has sparkles and flashing lights and emits little puffs of coloured powder. Percy absolutely hates it, and he has to furiously blink away tears. This shop is perhaps the only positive thing that Percy has seen with his eyes that has resulted from his actions in the war, and each new garish atrocity gives him an odd, fond feeling in his chest. “It scares them. But if you want to take one home, Perce, we’ll give you the family discount.”

“Seven galleons,” Fred says with a wink. The sign says clearly *three galleons*, but Percy snorts out a laugh. Cheered, Fred continues with a sly look at Draco, hovering awkwardly beside, “The Malfoy discount is six galleons, provided ex-Slytherin seeker Draco Malfoy agrees to attend the next Quidditch game at the Burrow.”

Draco looks absolutely terrified to be addressed in person by Fred. George snickers and adds, “Ron told me he’s invited you. His team is getting absolutely destroyed, with Ginny and Harry on the same team. It’s as if we’re chopped liver and not the finest Beaters that Hogwarts has ever seen. How does next Saturday sound, young Malfoy?”

“I’ll—I’ll let you know,” Draco manages. He sends a panicked look at Percy, blurts out, “I see Vince and Greg!” and then disappears. Percy watches him go, shaking his head. It will be good for Draco to participate in these Quidditch games. Percy is surprised—and gratified—to hear that Ron had invited him to attend.

“You can be our announcer,” Fred says to Percy. “Unless you’re having a midlife crisis and would like to learn to play Quidditch.”

“We can help you dye your hair too, if it comes to that,” says George wisely.

Percy rolls his eyes, but without heat. He still remembers that Saturday morning, five—six?—years ago when they'd taught a first year Ginny the hair changing spell. “No Quidditch for me, thanks,” he says, and to his surprise, he does not linger on the question of whether he would even be able to use a broom. That was one magical activity he need not partake in, even now. “I have something for you two, though.”

“A business proposition?” George asks, waggling his eyebrows at Percy. Percy hesitates and then nods. “Let us speak in private, my good sir.”

They whisk Percy through a dizzying array of colourful displays and through a small door. The twins’ office is surprisingly normal; there are posters on every wall, and half-smoking prototypes clustered together on a table by the window, and reams of parchment with scribbled notes and diagrams, but otherwise it looks much like the study areas in the

Hogwarts library, or perhaps the corners of the Gryffindor Common Room. In fact…Percy narrows his eyes at the red plush armchair that they direct him to, sitting haphazardly in the corner.

“You stole this from Hogwarts!” Percy exclaims, running a hand over the velvet. “Merlin, don’t let Professor McGonagall back here.”

Fred shrugs proudly. “We tried for a toilet seat for many years, but in all honesty, we weren’t sure what we’d do with the bloody thing after we nicked it.”

“And the Common Room needed some new furniture, anyway,” George says, sweeping aside some of the papers on his desk and hoisting himself on it. “Well? What do you think?”

“It’s *grand*,” Percy says honestly, and he’s rewarded with perhaps the first genuine smiles he’s received from the twins since they started at Hogwarts. “I’ve come to apologise to both of you.”

“For bringing Draco Malfoy into our shop?” George shakes his head. “Unforgivable, Perce.”

“But I did see him gathering quite the haul,” Fred points out playfully. “So perhaps the slimy snakes provide a new market segment for us, Forge.”

“Wisely said, Gred—”

Percy breaks in, looking at each in turn, “I have come to apologise for burning down your shop. And I’ve come to pay a share of the repairs. I did some research to estimate magical construction costs in this area, based on some of the permits I saw filed when I was working for the Minister, but please let me know if this amount is not sufficient. I have…plenty of gold.”

Fred takes the pouch of gold from Percy gingerly and tosses it to George, who drops it into an open desk drawer without tabulating its contents. Percy relaxes. He knows that the twins are likely not struggling with money, given the popularity of the shop, but paying some of the money back feels…right, and he is grateful that the twins did not refuse the gesture outright. “We *were* right pissed at you,” George admits, his voice serious. “But we saw some of the raids that old Noseless ordered on the shops, so we reckon you had our best interests in mind. Not to mention, losing the shop made us quite the set of tragic figures.”

“It turns out that most people thought it quite sad,” Fred says solemnly. “Women… investors…customers…they’re after us, Percy." He adds hoarsely, widening his eyes, "More than we can bear.”

Percy shakes his head with an unwilling smile. The twins have never been ones for difficult emotional conversations, which Percy is grateful for, even though he cannot help but think they are taking his betrayal a mite too lightly. “Well, I am sorry, and I wanted to tell you both personally. Also, I wanted to thank you for sending me those care packages. They were… well appreciated, and I noticed that you did not include any pranks, which was…thoughtful.”

Fred exchanges a look with George. “We’re sorry we’ve not had time to come.”

“We wanted to open the shop before the new Hogwarts year.”

“And we suppose we were a bit embarrassed,” Fred admits without shame. “We called you a git on nearly every episode of *Potterwatch.*”

“Well, I was a git,” says Percy fairly. “That was sort of the point.”

“A *spy*, in our very own family,” breathes George, fluttering his hand over his chest. “Honestly, I’m relieved, Percy. I know we always called you a prat, but it wasn’t…easy to think the worst of you.”

“Really?” Percy is genuinely surprised. “I would have thought it was quite easy for you lot.”

Fred flushes, summoning a chair from the corner and perching on it like a bird. “There’s a world of difference between being a prat and being *evil*. You’ll always be the former, but we never thought you were the latter.”

“And Bill wrote to us after the war and told us not to be angry about the Prewett inheritance,” George admits. He gives a conspiratorial smile to Percy and reveals, “He said that you deserved it for somehow winning over Auntie Muriel. It does not sound like she was particularly easy for him or Fleur to live with.”

Both the twins snigger, and Percy has to grin too. He has not met Fleur, but he knows his aunt, and he cannot imagine that she particularly enjoyed having Bill and his unmarried girlfriend living with her during the war, in tight confines.

“Mum’s still a bit prickly about it, though, but I expect you’ve heard enough about it from her.”

Percy winces despite himself. “Is she very furious at me?”

George frowns, puzzled. “Hasn’t she been visiting you, each week?”

“Not exactly.”

Perhaps it is the twins’ proclivity for silent communication, or perhaps they are more observant than Percy typically gives them credit for; regardless, they seem to understand immediately, and George leans forward and says quietly, “Don’t get upset at her, Percy. The war was…hard on her. Dad’s been really ill, and having us in hiding, and Ron off with Harry in the thick of it, and Ginny at Hogwarts with the Death Eaters, and Charlie working with the escape routes…”

“Bill was safe, though,” Fred says slyly, and Percy snorts before he can control the reaction.

“Yes, well, my point is, Mum has always reacted without thinking, and she’s far worse at apologising than you are.”

George nods in agreement, his earlier smirk sliding from his face. “She blames herself, for you losing your magic, you know.”

Percy wrinkles his nose. “How? She had nothing to do with it.”

“I don’t think mothers typically consider that the mistakes we make when we aren’t in the house are our own to make,” Fred continues wryly, smiling over Percy’s shoulder at George at some private joke. Percy remembers his mother’s outrage at Bill’s defection, then Charlie’s, and the twins’ early departure from Hogwarts, and has to concede that perhaps they have as much experience as he in being the recipient of his mother’s anger. “She probably thinks that she drove you off by being so furious with you over the Prewett thing.”

“Don’t apologise, if you can’t bear it,” George says fairly. “But don’t expect her to apologise, either. Say what you need to say to clear the air, and then just move on. You know Mum; sometimes all she needs is a good holler.”

Fred and George cannot tear themselves away from the crowds of customers clamouring to buy things from their shop, and Draco is nowhere to be found, so Percy goes alone to meet Ginny, who in contrast to the ecstatic air of the shop, looks dispirited and sad. Percy frowns at the sight of her, picking at her nails, her shoulders hunched over, looking far too small in the booth to be his nearly-adult sister. Before he sits, he motions over the waiter and gives him instructions to bring a bracing cup of hot chocolate, Ginny’s favourite, and a mug of soup. She looks far too skinny for his liking.

“Ginny,” he says neutrally, sliding into the booth opposite her. She drops her hands underneath the table, but not before Percy has seen that she has bitten her nails nearly to the skin. This is a habit that he and Ginny share, and so he feels within his rights to narrow his eyes at her. “I saw that. What’s going on?”

“How was the shop?” Ginny deflects. “Did you buy a Pygmy Puff? Fred and George bred far too many, so they’re basically paying people to take them away.”

“I didn’t see you there.”

Ginny shrugs combatively. “I’ve been helping them decorate, so I’ve seen it,” she says dismissively. “But I thought you might like to see it.”

“Well, that was very thoughtful of you.”

The waiter arrives with two mugs of hot chocolate. Percy had not requested one, but perhaps the waiter had made a mistake. It proves to be fortuitous, for Ginny first looks at her mug with a stubborn expression pushing out her lower lip, and only acquiesces to drink some when Percy pointedly takes a sip of his. It’s good, too: thick dark chocolate topped by a swirl of whipped cream. The heat seems to go straight to his toes, and some of Ginny’s frown slides off her face as she registers the same warmth.

“Did you come here alone?” Percy asks after they’ve each taken a few silent sips.

Ginny shrugs moodily. “Yeah,” she says, using her spoon to stir the rest of the whipped cream into her hot chocolate. “Ron and Hermione are on a *not date*.”

“A what?”

Ginny mimics Ron's voice nastily. "'It's *not a date*, Ginny.' They're refusing to admit that they're dating, or something like that." Ginny waves the spoon in the air to encompass the entire mess. "I'm not sure if they think they're not suited to each other and don't want to admit it, or they think they *are* suited to each other and don't want to admit it. Either way, Hermione's taken Ron to a Muggle shop. Sometimes I catch them snogging, but more often than not, they just argue."

"And, er, you?" Percy looks around him cautiously, but Ginny had chosen a table in the back of the café and so they are nearly alone. "And Harry?"

Ginny is silent, uncharacteristically so, and when Percy glances back to his sister, he sees her eyes glimmering with tears.

"Ginny," he says in alarm. "What did he do? Are you okay?"

Ginny shrugs and sniffs at the same time, a confused, wet-sounding gesture that seems to encompass the entire situation concisely. Percy wars with himself and then gingerly lays a hand across the table on Ginny's, which she takes as permission to say thickly, "He's being a bloody *prat*, is what he's done. Nothing bad," she adds as Percy's fingers tighten on hers, "he's just so *moody* and *angry* and *confused*. He's angry at everyone, even Ron and Hermione. He gets upset when they invite him to things, but he always refuses to go, and then he's upset that he's been left alone."

"I hear he's been playing Quidditch, though," Percy says cautiously.

Ginny snorts angrily. "Usually he catches the Snitch so quickly that the game ends before it's even begun. Then he storms inside, as if it's our fault." She hesitates, takes a fortifying sip of her hot chocolate, and then says savagely, "It's like he isn't happy that the war ended."

"Or perhaps he is not happy at *how* the war ended," Percy says, surprising them both. He thinks back to that day, over a decade ago now, when Harry had emerged implausibly from Hagrid's arms and slain the Dark Lord in front of the entire school and half the adult population of Wizarding Britain as they stood by mutely. Perhaps that type of glorious, mythical finish had provided the closure that Harry had needed. Percy compares the Battle of Hogwarts in all of its gory, awful glory to the Final Duel and has to concede that the former seemed a more fitting end to the war than the latter, though of course at an unjustifiably high price.

"I suppose," Ginny responds slowly. "It might explain why he's so angry at you being there."

"Did Harry tell you," Percy interrupts delicately, "about what he had to do in order to end the war?"

"Die, you mean?" Ginny says bluntly, crossing her arms protectively over her chest. His own hand suddenly cold, he returns it self-consciously to his person, jamming it uncomfortably into the pocket of his robes. "I was there, wasn't I? Although it seems you lot all knew he had to kill himself, whereas I had the luck to be surprised."

Percy sighs, thinking of that brief flash of insight where he'd felt like he'd understood Harry, finally, despite all of their differences. "He was ready to die, Ginny. His whole life had led up to this final moment, where he was going to sacrifice himself for everyone. He'd had one purpose in life since he was eleven years old, and finally it was all going to be over."

"And then he *lived*." When Ginny looks up to him, her eyes are seeking something in his, and she suddenly looks very young, like the girl who had once run after the train, crying at the prospect of being alone. "Shouldn't he be…happy?"

"Happy, but confused," Percy says softly. "Perhaps he does not know what to do with his life, now that his purpose has been extinguished. Perhaps he feels guilty for surviving, when so many died. I am sure he feels uncomfortable for all the acclaim he is getting, particularly if he's thinking to himself that all he contributed to the war was to die at the right time."

"Harry did a lot—" Ginny begins hotly.

"—he did," Percy interjects placatingly, "and he was very brave, Ginny. But so much of the war happened outside of his sphere. There was the war that you waged in Hogwarts, and the war between the Muggleborns and the Snatchers, and the war inside the Ministry, and even the war that took Fred and George's shop as a casualty."

"I thought that was you," bites out Ginny, but Percy can tell by the tightening of her shoulders that she is merely saying it to be mean, or to deflect attention from what he is saying.

For the first time, Percy really thinks through what he had taken from Harry. "Harry was given a really big task by the Headmaster. Did he tell you about it?" At Ginny's nod, he continues. "And then I arrived at the last minute to tell him it was all but complete, that we'd gotten the rest of them while he was hiding and searching fruitlessly, and that the only thing left to do was to show up and let the Dark Lord kill him. It would have felt very quick to him."

Ginny uncrosses her arms, but then feels as awkward with them as Percy had with his, and starts picking at her nails again under the table. "He ought to be bloody thankful. Dumbledore shouldn't have put all that on his shoulders, and he was lucky you and Snape and Tonks and her mum were there to help."

"Part of me *is* happy that I was there, as miserable as the experience was," says Percy truthfully, perhaps more truthfully than Ginny had expected, judging from the way she stiffens and wraps her fingers around the handle of the still-steaming mug. "I would not have wished the burden to destroy the *items* on any of your shoulders, least of all Harry's, who had such a heavy burden to bear already. But I did not include him in that decision, nor treat him as an adult, and I can understand why as a result he does not feel as though the war ended fairly, or why he is still upset at me."

When Percy thinks of Harry, when he moves past his frustration at Harry's petulant tones, all he can feel is sadness mixed with a sort of painful relief. Had he not thought to himself, that last day, that the war had made him better? That in this life, he had faced more challenging trials, and experimented with more powerful magic, and held a more burning responsibility

deep inside his chest, whereas in the last timeline he had been able to be a bloody stupid child, right until the end, when he saw the consequences of his actions with his own eyes? If he could think that about himself, why could he not think the opposite of Harry? The last timeline's Percy had never known about Tom—but he had never known about Severus either, or the Dementors, or Myrtle, or any of the rest of it, either. Perhaps he had stolen something valuable from Harry, though with the best of intentions.

Ginny squints at him. "You're more understanding than you let on, sometimes. You'd never think it, looking at you."

He is startled into a laugh. "I am far *less* understanding than I ought to be, at my age. But Ginny, regardless of whether Harry's anger is justified, he does not have any excuse to treat you poorly."

Ginny resists for as long as she can and then she slumps, all of the fight leaking out of her small, taut frame. "I know," she mumbles. "I want to be there to support him, but…"

"You're dealing with your own problems?" Percy hazards. "You can support him all you want, Ginny, but don't accept poor behaviour from him, and make sure that you're getting the support that you need, too. Have you spoken to Tonks recently? I would guess she has quite a lot to say on this topic."Ginny looks up, alert, as the bell above the door jingles, and Percy notes with approval and sadness how quickly her wand slides into her hand. Then she exhales and seems to hide back into herself. "All I did was run around Hogwarts playing pranks," she says, an apparent non-sequitur, but Percy understands what it feels like to think that one's actions are insufficient.

He raises a stern eyebrow at her. "I have it on good authority that those *pranks* were more like battle tactics. You had a battlefield of your own, Ginny, and from what I hear, you were quite a capable general of your army." He squints at his sister, who is still looking at her fingers but has more of a snap to her shoulders, and continues, "You should ask Severus about it, sometime. You were quite the thorn in the Carrows' sides, from what I hear. I have a suspicion that he would have given you points, had he been able."

Ginny smirks, looking far more mischievous and pleased with herself than she had been before, and Percy feels relieved to see some of her characteristic spirit back in the curve of her smile. "I suspected that he was on our side, you know," she reveals as the waiter approaches bearing two bowls of soup. "He pretended not to see me multiple times, and he was always there to call the Carrows away if they were being *too* unforgivable. And did you know that Madam Pomfrey doesn't know how to brew? There were always a dozen potions left unattended in the Hospital Wing, and I *know* it wasn't Slughorn. Cedric always told us to go to the Headmaster if we ever *really* needed it, but we never got the chance to try."

Percy shakes his head as he surveys the soup placed in front of him. It has chunks of beef and vegetables, and his stomach growls, reminding him that it is far past his usual lunchtime. Classic Severus, to have added his old hated brewing duties to his considerable list of responsibilities, and then not to say anything about it at all.

Ginny seems to perk up for the remainder of the meal, even when Draco joins them, looking harried and flustered and sporting green and silver hair. Percy is on edge for fireworks, but

perhaps Draco has been spending enough time with the Weasleys to be on good terms with Ginny as well, who spars teasingly with Draco for much of the meal without veering into the personal or petty taunts that would have once erupted between these two. Percy thinks back to that lunch with the Malfoys, so many years ago, and resolves to write to Narcissa as soon as he is home. She is likely as isolated as he, and she must be friendly enough with Severus to tolerate his presence in her home. Percy cannot imagine that Narcissa is comfortable with the idea of Draco becoming close to the Weasleys, but war makes for strange bedfellows, after all. His past decade has been a testament to that.

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On some days, it feels as if he is doing perfectly fine. On those days, he does not think of the loss of his magic, as tangible and painful as a missing limb. He does not reach for his wand automatically, nor begin to reach out with his magic, only to pull his hand forcibly back to his side, the world flat and colourless and quiet, as if engaging itself in a symphony he has been removed from in the middle of the third act. On the days where he feels he is doing well, he rises early and helps Severus with breakfast, and brews coffee by hand, and perhaps strolls around the yard, where he has begun contemplating the merits of planting a garden. He reads a book and takes notes with a quill, carefully and slowly so that he does not ruin a scroll of parchment, and he takes a shower and scrubs the dirt out of his hair, and shaves with the Muggle razor that Severus had awkwardly shown him how to use. Perhaps he plays chess with Draco, or writes to Ginny, or listens as Tonks updates him on the Ministry gossip, all these people who exist now only as ghosts in Percy's memory.

But on other days, Percy feels the loss of everything he'd ever known like a great gaping hole in his chest, a rift in the sky of his existence, and it is all that he can do to wrap himself in his blankets and hope for the day to end. At times, the pain is striking and sharp, little pinpricks hovering over his skin, or a jagged gash through his chest. Percy is familiar with all types of physical pain, by now, and his mind conjures them as he fights back the urge to cry. On those days, his life stretches in front of him, an endless study of agony.

On the days in between, however, Percy feels only empty, as if he had been merely participating in the outlines of his life, an understudy to a play he has no hopes of starring in. He does not feel pain, nor gladness, but only an overwhelming dreariness, a malaise that causes days to slip away from him without notice, that builds a smeary glass wall between him and everyone else, so that their voices take extra seconds to permeate his haze, so that he feels he ought to respond in a certain way, but cannot quite summon the energy to do so.

The joy of finishing a book, or beating Draco at chess, or discussing a recipe with Severus, or giving Ginny advice, or even the earlier triumph of seeing Fred so gloriously alive and well —on his empty days, all of it seems to recede, as if he is sinking slowly underwater, and the blurry sun above is growing smaller with each ragged breath. It is all so *pointless*. Does it matter if he makes conversation at dinner, or if his brothers have forgiven him, or if an old classmate has written to him to thank him for his efforts during the war? None of it seems to matter. Percy is very logical, but a logical proof relies on there being a set of unshakeable

assumptions on which to anchor himself, to grab with both hands and use to hoist himself up to the next conclusion. Without that bedrock, he is nothing more than a house made of flimsy materials, just one strong gust of wind away from collapsing, to be blown away, to leave no trace at all.

Severus seems to have his dichotomy of days too. On some days, Severus seems to disappear, staying in his room or visiting some private, unknown location. What Percy comes to use to characterise Severus' days, however, is the other man's tongue: sharply, slyly acerbic when he is feeling settled, harsh and biting when he is upset, and cool and distant when he has whatever passes for his empty days. But though Severus at times seems to know instinctively what Percy needs—a distraction, an argument, a research puzzle, a lazy morning in—Percy cannot even begin to fathom what might bring Severus solace. Certainly he does not dare bringing up sensitive topics; he learns quickly that to do so merely invites Severus' anger. But Severus seems so *self possessed,* so independent, so fully fledged as a person that Percy has a hard time even identifying where there may be gaps in the other man's day, let alone how to fill them with companionship. Friendship, if he dare use the word.

DECISIONS (3/3)

Chapter Notes

> Okay, this is a super long chapter. I probably should have added some of this to the last chapter, which was a few pages short of average, but alas. I actually didn't write any of these chapters in advance, since something told me that by the time I finished revising this story, it would be a very different one than what I started out with in my outline. If I stuck to the outline, for instance, there would be no universe where Severus and Percy would be sharing a house, let alone this, since they were only grudgingly partners throughout the whole thing. I suppose you lot will have to tell me whether this was a worse or better outcome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: DECISIONS (3/3)

1998— (Percy is 22 & 35, Severus is 37, Harry is 18, and society is putting itself back together)

The Merlin Gala is the most hotly anticipated event of the year, which should have come as no surprise to anyone in Britain, given the first half the year seemed poised to unfold as miserably as the previous one, that is to say, only joyous for the limited minority with the resources (or, in some rare cases, the pigheadedness) to make the best of a trying situation.

Still, the newspapers trumpet triumphantly the details of the upcoming gala, and the *Prophet* sees a surge in readership, particularly welcome after the Order set the office aflame earlier that year. (The new editor of the *Daily Prophet*—hastily promoted from staff writer after the majority of the previous staff quit in protest or were jailed—is so relieved to be out of the control of the Ministry and in front of her beloved printing presses that she personally proofreads each issue and even summons the courage to bar all articles from third party or opinion journalists, which she hopes will keep Skeeter and the like out of the newsroom). All are invited to the gala (all wizards, witches, and Squibs, at least; Percy scans the paper but does not see any creatures invited). The influx of new Ministry workers (largely Muggleborns and halfbloods looking desperately to secure employment in advance of the next fiscal year) work around the clock to erect a massive pavilion inside a complex section of wizard space housed within the Ministry atrium. The pavilion can hold hundreds, perhaps even thousands. It is a feat of event engineering that has not been seen at the Ministry since the first fall of the Dark Lord (fireworks, champagne toasts to the Chosen One, etc), or perhaps Minister Bagnold's famous retirement party (*"I assert our inalienable right to party,"* a phrase that has become in vogue again over a decade later).

The current Minister has cleverly diverted a portion of the funds appropriated from the many wealthy pureblood families who dared to set aside some of their personal assets to secure their continued well being under an irrational and dangerous Dark Lord. “If they were willing to use the funds for Voldemort,” Scrimgeour famously quips, and the newspapers gleefully repeat, “I cannot say they had anything more important to spend it on.”

The budget, therefore, is more than adequate, though certain members of the Ministry who worked *very hard* to ensure their operational expenses were reasonable and that their meagre monetary policy was at least a preliminary attempt to combat the rampant inflation beginning to rear its ugly head are less than pleased at the largess bestowed upon the event. (These workers, or at least a subset of them, have begun to contemplate seeking alternate employment. Kathleen Hopkins, for one, did not complete a very nasty overseas accounting and finance degree at a hybrid Muggle-Magic university to see *Scrimgeour* of all people asking her to make miracles out of Knuts and Sickles, as if he expected the subtle forces of the economy to magically recover under his guidance. As if only Dark Lords make poor fiscal decisions. Kathleen intends to stay only long enough to push through the Muggleborn Debt Relief program and then she is going to leave, she *is*, and she certainly will not look back).

Musicians, sculptors, fashion designers, architects—all are consulted, and Scrimgeour goes as far to establish the Peace Arts Coalition, which many grumble is quite frankly a step too far, given that those skilled in the arts have long since been patronised by the wealthy, rather than the government, and the majority of *Daily Prophet* readers are not quite sure what to make of independently funded artists that are not beholden to the artistic sensibilities of their patrons.

Some people—Percy among them—have to concede that the gala, while an overblown excuse to spend a lot of money celebrating each other, has provided a successful kickstart to their small businesses, or at least a few select shops in Diagon Alley, given that everyone now needs new robes, and champagne, and dark glossy shoes, and delicate fruits to arrange on a platter for the pre-gala teas that many people are hosting. Certainly the gala helps in some ways to minimise the divide between the Muggleborns and the purebloods, since both are jostling in line at Gringotts in an attempt to deposit or withdraw money before the goblins cease their private negotiations and announce the new interest rates and vault fees (rumoured to be vicious, particularly since there is not a full-time replacement for Amos Diggory, and the newcomer—a redhead with fangs dangling from his ears—does not inspire confidence).

The intended purpose of the gala, to announce the recipients of the Order of Merlin, is much less interesting to the average wizard than the rest of the corresponding rigmarole. Certainly nobody can disagree that those who aided the refugees, or established safe routes, or forged papers, or whatever quiet heroics were performed in the dead of night should be denied the award. Most of the families who sincerely agreed with the Dark Lord have at least one member in prison and are not keen to see any others go the same way. Avery and Yaxley form an unlikely alliance (unlikely only for the old pureblood families, who know that an Avery partnering with a Yaxley is but another sign that their society has begun to change, swiftly and irrevocably, since others would see nothing more than two former Death Eaters buddying up) to spread the shocking news that the Dark Lord was a raving mad *half blood*, Muggle raised, a blight on their society and a threat to the Old Ways and all they hold dear.

And, well, everyone remembers the serpentine face, the slits for the nose, those flashing eyes. Perhaps if Voldemort had continued to look like Tom Riddle, their agenda would fall on deafer ears. Not to mention, Rookwood adds slyly to the pureblood Ministry crowd after a series of owls from Yaxley, are they going to maintain loyalty to the old guard rather than moving to consolidate power in this shifting new environment? After all, the same political instincts that incited these families to ally with Voldemort have seen the changes that have already occurred, five months after the Final Duel.

For instance, Hermione Granger allied with *Tobias Greengrass* to champion a revised Culture Studies class, which would be mandatory for the first three years of Hogwarts, and cover Muggle and Wizarding culture and history? Such a thing is a clear sign that their old society no longer exists, not in any sort of meaningful way. Percy reads this proposal in the paper and snorts; the next day, a letter comes his way from Tobias, requesting help in such a way that to refuse would certainly cast a pall on Landon's memory, and be a blatant attempt to circumvent the debt that Percy most definitely owes to the Greengrass family.

The Ministry has an absolute deluge of permit applications to work through, as a handful enterprising young wizards see opportunity in the numerous empty storefronts scattered around Britain. Unfortunately, the Ministry must balance these new applications with fairness to the old residents, many of whom were unfairly driven out, or pre-emptively fled during the early days of the war. Somehow, there are both too many job openings and too many unemployed wizards, a puzzle that stymies everyone from the Head of St. Mungo's—trying desperately to recruit more Healers to help with the masses of wizards who have suffered spell damage, anxiety, malnourishment, or torture over the last few years and are belatedly seeking treatment—to Madam Malkin, who cannot personally fit every single person in Britain for new dress robes on the same day, particularly because the centaur communities who typically provide the silk for said robes are in a state of upheaval with their own post-war dealings and cannot provide accurate delivery estimates.

And there are other changes, too: people with reflexes that cannot be erased by five months of peace, and anger bubbling up in alleyways, and Hogwarts students who feel they have nothing to learn from returning to the castle, and parents who are frightened to let their children out of their sight. There are teenagers who exult in their freedom by overindulging in odd hallucinogens or alcohol, and former forced fugitives demanding fair recompense for their plight (some even submit receipts for the emergency supplies they were forced to purchase or the estimated cost of the emotional damage they encountered while fleeing for their lives), and wizards grappling with the implications of what atrocities they aided in as a result of their own fear and anxiety. People who learned the difficult way how prejudiced their neighbours were all along—and those who risked their lives for people they barely knew.

All of these people obediently RSVP *yes* to the gala, or so Liam informs Percy in an utterly unexpected letter. Percy squints at the scroll when it arrives and suspiciously sees Scrimgeour's influence behind the untidy scrawl. He is not stupid enough to believe that Scrimgeour had accepted his denial of the award easily, without stirring up some sort of fight.

If Liam is to be believed, the gala will reach record numbers. The idea of it makes Percy sick to his stomach, even if Scrimgeour will honour Percy's wishes and allow him to sit in the sidelines. Lunching with Ginny in Diagon Alley or visiting his brothers' shop had not been easy, but they were challenges that Percy had felt cautiously confident enough to at least attempt. Attending a gala with hundreds of curious, nosy wizards, all itching to see the infamous Severus Snape and the Dark Weasley heir—

Percy cannot do it. He will not do it. He does not want to buy new robes; he does not want to think about how to hide his lack of magic; he does not want to answer questions, or face accusing eyes, or satisfy the society-wide desire for gossip. He does not want to be *seen*. He does not want to be judged.

Severus understands, insofar as Severus rarely wants to be in public and scowls angrily each time Percy dares bring up the gala. Tonks is understanding but she does not *understand*, which is a difference large enough to cause Percy to snap at her when she tries to reassure him. Draco most resolutely does not understand, though he has cause to fear the spotlight more than once, because Draco and his mother have decided they no longer want to flinch away from people's eyes when they go into public.

"Father's dead," says Draco when he visits Percy to practise his speech. He aims for careful nonchalance, but Percy can hear the slight waver in his voice nevertheless. Percy sometimes wonders if what he stole from Harry he had given in equal measure to Draco, or whether his timeline's Draco had been this self-possessed and mature at eighteen. Lucius' influence, or Narcissa's? "But he died trying to save my life, which for Father would have been akin to his turning from the Dark Lord. Mother and I have no reason to answer to anyone."

Percy, from his memory of Lucius' last day, does not *quite* think that Lucius had been prepared to turn on the Dark Lord, but he says nothing. For all of Lucius' faults, he had cared strongly and genuinely for his family, and given that Percy had essentially set him up for failure, Percy thinks he owes it to his memory to allow his son and wife this small comfort. "Well, you and your mother are being honoured, which should help."

Narcissa seems to regard her upcoming Third Class medal, given to her for her role in assisting Andromeda destroy one of the Horcruxes (or "life wards," as Scrimgeour continues to claim) with much of the same lack of enthusiasm as Andromeda, who for all her assistance in the war had also requested that the Minister abstain from bestowing any awards on her, let alone a Second Class Order of Merlin. Nevertheless, both Black sisters had their names in the paper. After perusing the paper, it appears to Percy as if everyone in their society is either dead, imprisoned, or being awarded a medal, but at the very least he supposes that will assure high attendance at the gala, and it *is* at least ostensibly Scrimgeour's decision to make.

"I have quite the speech," Draco says, brandishing a poker from Severus' fireplace at Percy, who raises his eyebrows amusedly. Draco's hair has been freshly trimmed, and he is experimenting with a beard, which for the past twenty minutes has been a source of distress for Percy. (Percy hopes Ron or Tonks will say something before he has to be the one to inform Draco delicately that the beard does nothing for his fine features, unlike Harry, whose scruff seems to add to the general air of rough wildness that hovers around the Boy Who Lived these days.)

“I’m excited to hear it,” says Percy. “Let me guess: it is about how you utilised all of the Slytherin wiles in your repository to defect from the Dark Lord and help the Boy Who Lived in his time of great need?”

Draco deflates by a few degrees, the tip of the poker dragging against the carpet. “Not *exactly.* And what have you got? How you overcame the great shame of the Weasley name to mingle with the finest of society?”

Percy rolls his eyes. His former Death Eater companions have not contacted him; he does not want to know if they feel betrayed or thankful that he had wormed his way into their closed ranks on the basis of artifice. Surely many of them are parsing back what they had said to Percy, wondering if their words had been carried to the Order. Percy does not care about the vast majority of Death Eaters, but there are a few—Bulstrode, for one, and Yaxley, despite it all—that he wishes he could speak to more plainly in order to explain his actions fully. “It just all seems so…pompous, I suppose. And since I expect to receive a Third Class medal, if that, I can’t imagine I’ll have too much time allotted to me.”

“People want the pomp and circumstance,” replies Draco wisely, and for the briefest second, Percy sees an older Draco hovering at the fringes of the teenager’s body, a Draco with his father’s political acumen and his mother’s careful loveliness. Then, he swishes the poker a few times in the air, as if he were a knight battling a dragon, and the image dissolves. “We’ve had a bloody awful year, Percy. A few years, really. It’s such a *relief* to think about the cut of your robes, isn’t it? Instead of wondering whether your mother will survive past Christmas?”

Percy acknowledges the point with a small grumble. He’d said much the same thing to Voldemort, once upon a time.

Perhaps that is what is bothering Percy, more than the shock of adjusting to a post-war life, more than the uneasiness clouding around his mental image of himself on stage, stuttering into a magical microphone, while the audience looks on, unimpressed and suspicious. Scrimgeour seems to be following much the same playbook that Percy would have recommended to Tom, had it become necessary. Let the dust settle for a couple of months; have a few high-profile cases, published in the papers, to publicly punish the perpetrators of violence; make a handful of nominal changes, aimed more at appeasing the masses than anything else; and cap the whole thing off with a bloody gala, with pomp and circumstance galore.

And Percy does not, strictly speaking, disagree with the idea of a gala. People deserve the opportunity to celebrate each other; that anyone defied the Dark Lord at all merits a celebration, though Severus would disagree. What he disagrees with is that he has to attend at all. Even the whispers that break out when Severus and Percy reluctantly brave Diagon Alley on a Tuesday morning to pick up new dress robes are difficult to bear. Their presence nearly stops all foot traffic entirely. Severus Snape, Albus Dumbledore’s *murderer*, in company with that Dark Weasley boy, whom everyone knew was controlling the Minister, both being praised for their espionage? Had it all been a lie? Had Dumbledore even died by Snape’s hand? Had the Weasley boy been helping, behind the scenes, all along? How had they lived with themselves, the choices they had had to make, seeing hatred on all of the faces of those

who had once known them? Had they— *spoken* to You Know Who? Or rather, had they *lied* to him, and succeeded, or was it all some sort of trick, just two wizards playing both sides?

Severus nearly unleashes a series of hexes on the crowd, but Percy manages to forestall the inevitable disaster by quickening his steps and darting through the crowd until Severus is forced to follow or be left behind. As a consequence, Severus sulks through Percy's robe-fitting and conducts his own in private; Percy chooses robes of a deep maroon, nearly black, a subtle nod to his Gryffindor heritage without being gaudy or cheap. They are adorned with a subtle gold filigree that dances in the firelight, a luxury that reminds him of Lucius, and perhaps he ought to be ashamed of himself, but he feels like he will need some of Lucius' strength to get through the gala, some of Lucius' silver tongue and charisma, some of Lucius' impeccable taste.

None of his siblings seem to understand Percy's fear either, even Ginny, who despite herself has been caught up in the excitement. Percy cannot begrudge any of them their good cheer; he is happy that they are each being celebrated, for each had a part to play in the war, and each left their own impact on society. In the last timeline, only Ron had been thrust into the public eye, and any of their own joy and relief was dampened forcibly by Fred's death. In this timeline, Percy finds that even from the whispers he gleans at the margins of society, the Weasley family is becoming quite well-regarded. (Fred and George, as the only single siblings save for Percy, take great pleasure in informing the rest of them as to how popular they are proving to be with would-be suitors).

The one time that Percy sees his mother, at a Weasley supper where Percy arrives late, leaves early, and says very little, she looks tired but cheerful, and he has the strange thought that perhaps she would understand his desire to stay out of the limelight. Percy does not know why he had ever wanted acclaim so badly that it had been reflected in the Mirror of Erised. All he wants now is to disappear, to have people expect nothing of him, to be free to make his own mistakes, to be ignored and unregarded. If this had been what his mother had felt as the heir to the Prewett family, he can, strangely enough, understand her desire to seek refuge as a Weasley housewife. At least everyone would form their own assumptions about her and let her *be*.

Percy's siblings are of the opinion that Percy should accept the First Class medal and inform everyone in not-so-subtle terms that he all but saved the Wizarding World. To even *think* of making such a claim feels like the greatest arrogance—and artifice—that he could muster. Percy had done very little that Dumbledore and Harry had not accomplished in the first timeline, even if Severus always snaps otherwise when Percy makes the mistake of airing such a thought. Percy cannot overlook that any *bravery* that he had displayed in destroying the Horcruxes had only been necessary due to the utter *stupidity* that he had displayed first. Percy had created a demon of his own making; he ought not to be *applauded* for barely having the ability to destroy him minutes before he turned on the rest of the world.

Days before the event, Percy has begun to contemplate not attending. Having heard nothing further from Scrimgeour, Percy has cautiously concluded that the Minister does not intend to force Percy through the ordeal. If that were the case, nobody would notice if Percy were not there, save for perhaps Severus. It would not be precisely a move befitting a Gryffindor to hide from the event of the season, but Percy doesn't know if he can still make a claim to

Godric's house. By the eve of the gala, Percy has all but decided that he will not attend. Severus will likely be irritated at him for leaving him to the wolves, but Percy thinks that either he *has* given enough of himself to British society, and staying home ought to be his reward, or he does not deserve to be rewarded and therefore need not attend at all. (Tenuous logic, he admits to himself in the mirror, but logic nevertheless).

Severus receives the news in silence. Neither of them have yet moved to change into their formal dressings for the occasion, but technically the gala will start in an hour, and so they ought to abandon their half-finished books for the evening and move to paint themselves with their public façades.

"I can't do it, Severus," Percy adds into the silence, half-combative, half-tentative. He cringes at the whine that he can hear in the words but tries to stay firm. "There's no real reason for me to attend."

"The Minister may yet award you a medal," Severus responds, turning a page of his book as if the conversation bores him. "It would draw further notice to your absence if you were not there to receive it. I would suggest you attend, thank the Minister politely, and step away without making a fool of yourself."

"I can't go," Percy repeats, feeling frustration bristle on the lines of his shoulders. "I'm a bloody Muggle, Severus. Someone is bound to notice, and when they do, my life as I know it will be over."

Severus' lips are thin and compressed, and when he raises his eyes from the book to meet Percy's, Percy takes a step back in surprise. "If you were indeed a Muggle, there would be no shame in it, nor pity. But you are a wizard who has lost his magic; not a Squib, not a Muggle, a wizard."

Percy's shoulders tighten defensively and he adjusts his glasses with the hand that used to hold his wand. "Such a distinction is ridiculous, Severus."

"Is it?" Severus stands, crosses the room to the cabinet, and takes out a sheath of papers bound together by a spell. Returning to his seat, he looks down at his notes, as if to refresh his memory, or perhaps merely to avoid Percy's gaze. "I have been investigating your condition, as you seem keen to spend your freedom on games of chess."

Stung, Percy takes the seat opposite to Severus, though he cannot tell what is written on the paper. "It is my *condition*, as you say, to research when I so please."

On the stool next to him, there are now four books stacked on the small table next to Percy's stool. One with dark blue binding; two thick leather tomes; and a slender green book, recently added. Severus looks at them meaningfully; Percy has not even read their titles, let alone opened them. "And when will that be? You cannot ignore your condition forever." Severus flicks him an evaluatory glance and then says quickly, combatively, "I have written to Nicholas Flamel, to seek his advice on the matter."

"You wrote to *Nicholas Flamel?*" Percy asks, incredulously. "Where is the letter? Let me see the letter, Severus."

Perched in his chair, sleeves rolled back and dressed in a crisp white shirt over black trousers, Severus is a far cry from the bat of Percy's childhood. Still, the look that he levies on Percy—turning, eyebrow raising, thunder gathering at the corners of his purses lips—is much the same, and certainly Percy feels some of his courage deserting him at the sight. "My correspondence is my own affair."

The only thing that Percy can contemplate replying with would be far too embarrassing to verbalise, and just because he has kept no secrets from Severus—how can he, when his life is so flat and empty, when he requires assistance even to visit his siblings—does not mean that Severus does not keep secrets from him. Even after three weeks of living together, Percy is uncomfortably aware that he has only breached the surface of getting to know the inscrutable Severus Snape. *I was not aware I owed you an account of my whereabouts.*

Shut up, Tom, Percy scowls to himself and then to Severus, who examines his expression and then floats him the letter. With a sharp, defiant look at Severus, Percy unfolds the thin sheet of parchment.

...it is easier to live as a Muggle than many assume…

...unique properties of physical magic…

...my condolences to the boy…

"You dare," says Percy, and his voice is shaking. It sounds unfamiliar to him, like someone else is speaking the words, shaping them with unfamiliar lips and feeding them to his mouth. "You dare tell Flamel of my predicament."

"I did not tell him needlessly," Severus says, holding out his slim hand for the letter. "I thought it likely he may have information on your *predicament,* as you call it."

"Why?" Percy presses himself against the back of his chair, feeling sick and claustrophobic.

Severus says evenly, "You heard the Dementor. If you are to heal the damage to your soul…if *we* are to do so, then we must act with intention and focus."

"I do not wish to think of my soul, Severus," Percy spits out. He has time—nothing but time. He has so much time that he is drowning in it. He has enough time that he does not *need* to think of things he cannot think of, not until they are distant and remote, not until the memories of those things only hurt like old bruises, rather than sting painfully. "You said I would have the freedom to do what I wished, here."

"And so you do," replies Severus evenly. "And I have the freedom to do the same. I wish to focus on my own healing in addition to yours."

For a second, Percy wavers at this quiet, rational response. Severus had faced his demons; oughtn't Percy? Then he rallies his anger and bites out, "You have no right to discuss my *healing* without my consent. I am not a project to be studied or discussed."

"It has been nearly a *month,* Percy," exclaims Severus. "And you have not begun to consider —"

"—I am not *ready*, Severus!" Percy shakes his head, the letter sharp and slippery in his palm. "What is your hurry? Are you tiring of my presence here? You are hoping you can fix me and then be done with your *penance?*"

From the involuntary flush staining the bridges of Severus' cheeks, Percy can see he won a point. Unknown to him, one side of his mouth pulls higher than the other in an uncomfortably familiar smirk as he leans forward and says viciously, "You are, aren't you? I've wondered why you were so *passionate* about helping me. You never cared for me, Severus, beyond what I could do for you. You hope that if you *heal* me, you'll make up for your sins."

"Do not prescribe motive to my actions, particularly when you are incorrect," snarls Severus. Even in Percy's muted state, he can feel the edges of Severus' magic as it begins to swirl through the room.

Percy shakes his head incredulously. "It's simple logic, you know. If you believe that I can be *healed,* that doing so will right your wrongs, then you believe that I need healing. So when you said that you were interested in being my companion despite any of the outcomes, it was a lie."

"Do not be ridiculous, *Weasley*."

"I will not be your mechanism for redemption, *Snape*," Percy says cruelly. "Bringing my magic back will not bring Lily back too."

"Being cruel won't bring back Tom, either," Severus says, and his voice is suddenly quiet. The words hang between them, and Percy looks at the rug between them, hating it suddenly, how dull and uninspired and unchanging it has been for the past month.

"I don't want to bring back Tom." Percy coughs out a hoarse laugh, turning his face away, so that he cannot see the expression on Severus' face. "He was evil, Severus. Beyond redemption. I destroyed my own soul to destroy him, and good bloody riddance."

Severus' voice is nearly unrecognisable. "It is understandable that you would miss him, Percy."

"Well, I don't." Percy squeezes his toes together so tightly that he feels the knuckle on his big toe pop in surprise. "I shouldn't. I *can't* miss him, Severus. The war is over; I'm getting an *award* for being on the *side of the light*. I can't miss the Dark Lord."

"Do you—do you miss the Dark Lord?"

Percy releases his toes and feels suddenly very old, as if he had lived three lives, or four, only to still arrive at the same place. "Yes," he admits quietly, and it is a betrayal of everyone who still thinks well of Percy. "Yes. How can I, Severus? How can I not? Part of me *misses* the war." He waves his hand, encompassing the small room with its small row of books and small, Muggle fireplace. "I appreciate that you have let me live here, Severus, but…"

“The Dark Lord made you feel powerful,” says Severus softly. Percy looks up and is taken aback by the understanding in Severus’ lined face. “He made you feel respected. He made you feel as if you were his equal, and it was intoxicating.” Percy would have protested had it not been obvious that Severus was speaking for himself too. Some tightness inside Percy’s chest loosens as Severus continues quietly, “I have had the thought, sometimes, that some wizards are not made for peace. Lucius was often…bored, in the Ministry, which is one reason why he never made an attempt to run for Minister. I see that same restlessness in you…and in myself.”

The war had been awful. It had been terrible, horrible, *awful*. Percy had barely slept, and barely ate, and he’d ended most days trembling in his bed, feeling overwhelmed and sorrowful and so bloody *tired*. And yet—

“And Tom was your companion, in a way that the Dark Lord was not.” Severus quirks his lips, though without humour. “I felt the same way about the Tom I first met, as well as Lucius, when I was young. I am not patronising you—” he says over Percy’s bristling, “—but neither the Tom nor the Lucius I knew during this war had the same effect on me.”

Percy deflates and studies his fingers. “I suppose part of me cannot help but think that it all could have been so *different.*”

“Refusing to heal yourself will not change the past,” says Severus gently.

But the pity angers Percy all over again, or at the least, makes his throat clench and his fingers curl into his palms. “You don’t *know* what will help me, Severus. You don’t know anything about how to live any more than I do.” Percy waves his hand at the tiny corridor, the continued monotony of their existence. “You have earned your peace, Severus; why do you not *spend* it?”

“What is that you wish for me to say?” Severus looks up at Percy, and his expression is almost helpless, which stings angrily in Percy’s chest. “You enjoy pointing out that we are the near to the same age when it suits you, but you ignore it at other times. I am no longer your professor, nor your handler as a spy. Does it please you to know that I do not know how to heal myself, any more than I know how to heal you?”

For a prolonged second, Percy stares angrily at Severus, who has always had all of the answers, who ought to still have them now. Then he feels ashamed. He glances at the stool next to him, thinking of Severus silently adding volumes for Percy to use in his research, and his cheeks flush underneath the sting from Severus' blow. He had been selfish, thinking of his own pain, his own misery, but he had not considered Severus' losses either.

“I’m sorry,” he says finally, and as always when he apologises to Severus, the other man flinches, as if the words are painful and unexpected. Percy feels a bit better for having apologised, but not *that* much better, and he searches fruitlessly for something else to say.

Severus uses a spell to roll up the parchment, including Nicholas Flamel’s letter, and returns the whole bundle to the shelf. “I will leave in an hour,” he says, not making eye contact with Percy. “You need not attend, if you do not feel yourself…able.”

Percy scowls his way to his room, where he sits on the small wooden bed and feels the familiar sheets under his hands. Everything in the room irritates him: the wooden dresser, the still-shrunk boxes from his flat, the writing desk with its careful collection of quills.

“Blast it all,” mutters Percy to himself, uncharitably. He wastes another second avoiding the thought before he lifts his chin and forces himself to face it. He *is* hiding, with his desire to avoid the gala, which he supposes is understandable if he were the only one affected by his absence.

But where Percy has attended hundreds of these events, some by the Minister’s side, some with the crowd of young Ministry employees angling for invitations to free parties, and some as the representative of the Dark Lord, he cannot imagine the same can be said for Severus. And Percy, if the Minister is to be believed, will receive only a small medal, along with dozens of others, and only for his part in passing information to the Order. Percy knows precisely what colour invitations to use, and which requisition forms to use to request catering from the approved vendors, and what formulas to use to estimate staffing requirements.

Severus is all but attending the event blind. He will do so wearing brand-new robes, he will do so without a single friend in the audience, and he will do so knowing he must accept the highest honour that their society has. Severus’ insistence on suffering in silence, on pushing Percy away instead of asking for help, of being so bloody *noble*—it grates on Percy’s nerves. The thought of Severus sitting alone at a lavishly decorated table for several hours, a forbidding scowl on his face, makes Percy feel impossibly sad, which irritates him all over again.

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Severus fumes throughout the next hour, rippling his robes off the enchanted hanger and shrugging into them savagely. His sneer only grows more pronounced as he stares at himself in the mirror, at the same lanky appearance that has greeted him every day for over thirty-five years. Same greasy hair, same yellowing teeth, same tired face with its cavernous eyebags and jagged frown lines. Nothing on his face suggests that he is a man now of peace, let alone a man soon to receive an *award*. When Severus sees others from his year at Hogwarts—not that many survived both wars—he sometimes thinks he looks far older than they, even those with spouses and insipid little children and worries of their own. Only the werewolf continues to look as haggard as Severus feels, which is perhaps one reason why Severus cannot stand the sight of him.

Percy, despite his *affliction* and his crippling insecurities, looks far more as he ought in his thirties. The war aged him, as it aged all of them, and so the boy does not look as fresh-faced and cheerful as he had once, standing in Severus' office on the eve of his graduation, telling him without the slightest regard for the impossibility of the idea that he planned to turn a Horcrux into a portrait to ply it for information.

Severus considers the memory and snorts to himself. Would he have agreed so easily if Percy came to him now with that distant, bruised expression behind his wireframe glasses, the slight pauses before his words, the unveiled hopelessness that at times emerged implausibly from his carefully blank mask? No, he would not have. Something about how determined the Weasley boy had been had—touched something inside Severus' dark and diseased heart, made him abandon caution in the face of reckless hope.

Now they are to be honoured. Or rather, now *he* is to be honoured, since Percival Ignatius Weasley does not suffer fools lightly, even when they are of his own image. Severus would have pressed the issue earlier, had he not been…wary of inciting precisely the same sort of argument that had just erupted between them.

Severus scowls to himself and pulls the new robes more tightly around his body. The fabric feels strange against his bare skin, and he pulls open a drawer in his cedar dresser and examines his selection of plain black and white shirts. Was he meant to wear something under the robes? They buttoned in the front, a long row of silver gleaming buttons with intricate detailing, and fell to lightly brush the ground. Purebloods traditionally wore only pants under their robes, or so Severus thinks, faintly recalling the sound of Lucius' smirking voice as he instructed a young Severus in proper attire. Would that apply to such an event such as this? Would he have to—unbutton his robes so as to receive the medal?

Severus *could* go into the other room and ask Percy, for doubtlessly the boy knows everything about these types of events, but he cannot quite bring himself to do so. Without lingering on why, Severus tells himself firmly to stop dithering over his appearance like a fifth year and decidedly pulls a crisp white shirt out of the drawer without thinking on it any further. At the very least, the shirt would provide a barrier between the suspiciously luxurious feel of the fabric, so he could try and pretend he was wearing his customary teaching robes.

(He'd binned all of those coarse, rough black robes during his frenzied cleaning of the house, and had to purchase a new set of them via owl order. It had been an impetuous and stupid thing to do, but he could not stomach the idea of wearing his Hogwarts robes for a single day longer).

Shrugging the robes back over the shirt, Severus returns to the mirror, which was intentionally a Muggle mirror and so would not bother him with trite comments. He bares his teeth at his appearance, unable to entirely prevent himself from remembering the panicked look of shock that had crossed Percy's face when Severus had admitted that he knew no better how to heal from the tumult of war. It should not bother him; he is Weasley's professor, his handler, the *adult* to Weasley's child, and he should have been prepared to shoulder the burden before offering his house to the boy. What care did Percy have for Severus' pain? Severus is an *expert* in pain. He ought to be an expert in redemption, too, or at least with living with one's sins.

The hair will not be improved, he decides roughly, watching with distaste how it swings, unkept and lanky, on either side of his face. His teeth—well, his teeth he could fix, though the Teeth-Whitening spell tastes foul and he had not thought to prepare one of the many potions he occasionally forced himself to take to correct some of the outright decay of his body that threatened to overwhelm him every five years or so.

Weasley had *no right* to expect Severus to magically *heal* him, as if he were *Minerva*, or even *Albus*, ready with a warm word and knowing look. Although, Severus has to concede as he grimaces over the spell, Percy had not asked Severus to attempt anything of the sort. All he had asked, in his own quiet way, was for Severus to leave him bloody well alone, and Severus had done his best. So what if the boy wanted to waste his ill-gotten youth on lengthy periods asleep in bed, or trite little chess games with Draco (who was still avoiding Severus, something that Severus keeps meaning to correct, though he is not up for a fight with Lucius' son), or visits with his siblings. It…relieved Severus, it did, to know that at least some of the Weasley children were beginning to display the same maturity that had always tightened Percy's face, even if Molly and Arthur were being…

Severus runs his tongue over his teeth and proclaims them adequate. After a prolonged hesitation, he transfigures a leather tie out of a scrap of parchment on his desk and ties his hair behind his head, in the type of low-hanging tie that Lucius had so often favoured. His head feels lighter and rather more naked without his hair, but it does not make him feel quite so…greasy, so he gives his reflection another scowl for good measure and then turns away resolutely.

The Nymphadora girl is another point altogether. Severus thinks that if Percy has not realised that the girl is fond of him, he will soon, which he supposes will be sufficient motivation for the boy to begin waking earlier and acting with a bit more energy. Severus is not sure that Nymphadora is the correct choice for Percy—for one, her careless and cheerful approach to problem-solving seems designed to irritate Percy, who had been famous among the professors for his strict, rigid meticulousness—but she seems to have easily accepted his role in the war, his lack of magic, and his hampered return to peace. Severus wonders when, or if, Percy will tell her of his travels through time, and how the girl will take the news. At least Andromeda will be a fierce and protective mother-in-law, and certainly one that could take on Molly Weasley for sheer stubbornness and determination.

Robes, shirt, teeth, hair, shoes. At long last, Severus cannot fritter away the time any longer, and so he slowly and deliberately walks to the parlour, his footsteps echoing as he descends the stairs. He has a sudden image of his father, walking down these very same steps, dressed in his dark work clothing, his face scrubbed clean and his hair neatly parted. The man that returned to their house at the end of the day bore very little resemblance to the one who kissed his wife on the cheek, accepted a bagged lunch, tousled his son's hair, and then descended into the darkness and clamour of the mundane and demeaning job that was the family's only source of income. When Severus first saw an image of a prisoner in Azkaban, during his fourth year, he'd thought at once of his father, walking with a weary step back into the house after dark, his face smudged with dirt, his shoulders pressed low from the indignity of letting some condescending rich boy dictate his every movement, his hair greasy and his eyes flashing with barely-muzzled rage. The prisoner had lifted its head and stared out of the portrait with that same resigned anger, the same hopeless agony, the same brimming danger.

The sight of Percy in the parlour, dressed in his own robes and flicking through a selection of pocket squares neatly arranged in a small book, clears some of the clouds in Severus' mind, though his brief spark of warmth is replaced almost immediately by a slow clench in his stomach. He had not—he had not prepared—

“I was thinking that you would have silver,” says Percy, without meeting Severus’ eyes. He motions with his head to the neat silver cloth, laying out on Severus’ chair. “But I just can’t decide what I ought to have. Maroon is such a *stupid* colour, particularly with my hair. Auntie Muriel would have my head if I tried for gold, but *black* seems a bit…”

Percy makes a slight moue of disapproval, perhaps unconsciously, as he lingers on a dark black square. It is a look that Severus has only ever seen when the boy speaks of his aunt—*Auntie Muriel says that a summer evening party has the same dress code as a winter party, so we ought to be fine with such dark colours*—and it suggests some nervousness, some insecurity akin to the unease that had kept Severus fretting at his appearance for nearly an hour. Severus is surprised by the even set of his voice when he says, “What are the other options you are considering?”

Percy gives him a shy smile over the book of pressed fabric, and Severus tries not to pretend that he is not pathetically pleased at the sight. It will be better for them all when Percy leaves Severus and moves forward with his life. Severus has proved without a question of a doubt that he is not a sufficient…companion for Percy, not in war nor in peace, and the boy deserves to live the rest of his life without a greasy dungeon bat hovering over his head.

They choose a cream-coloured square for Percy that offsets some of the darkness of his robes, and Percy folds both his and Severus’ the Muggle way, his fingers moving deftly, explaining that Auntie Muriel had never allowed him to tie a tie nor fold a pocket square nor cuff his sleeves with a spell. A slight awkward pause where Percy moves toward Severus, as if to tuck the square into his robes, and Severus flinches before he can stop himself, his wand appearing in his hand.

Percy takes a hasty step back, his hand faltering, and Severus curses himself. “It is fine,” he says shortly, stowing his wand. “Proceed.”

Luckily, the boy needs to fetch his watch and Prewett signet ring from his room, providing Severus the opportunity to rearrange his face into something more appropriate. “Are you ready?” He queries neutrally when Percy returns.

Percy fastens the watch around his wrist and slides the ring onto his finger. “We ought not to leave quite yet.”

Severus frowns. “We are already nearly an hour delayed.”

“As we should be.” Percy turns and walks down the corridor into the kitchen, where he pours himself a cup of cold water. Severus makes a disbelieving sound in his throat as he follows, and Percy elaborates over his shoulder, “We want to be at least an hour late, for our sakes, and so we don’t cause the kind of riot that we did at Diagon Alley. Let some of the others arrive before us; hopefully Harry will be there soon, so everyone will be crowding around him.”

“I see,” Severus says flatly. He prepares his own small glass of water, and they stand there in silence in their dress robes. He has never been to a *gala* ; the fanciest party that Severus ever attended was his own Marking, given as he did not attend the Graduates’ Weekend party and had never been to a wedding or a funeral.

"It will be fine," Percy says firmly, as if he could see inside Severus' head to the shameful insecurity that still lingers, as if Severus were seventeen again and warring with himself furiously over whether Rosier's invitation had been genuine or the build-up to a cruel joke.

Severus turns angrily on Percy. "An asinine comment, given you can no longer profess to know the future."

Percy winces, and Severus grimaces, wondering if he ought to apologise. Percy at times makes jokes about his affliction or about the indignities of re-living a life, but Severus believes he can safely judge both of those impulses to be akin to the desire to pick at a painful scab, if only to see what pain erupts as a consequence.

"I do not know the future," concedes Percy tersely, before Severus can begin to formulate an apology, "But I do know how these events generally go, given that I have attended far more of them than you. Even if we arrive now, most people will be outside, mulling about and posing for the photographers and toadying up to the Minister. Soon, the Minister will give a brief speech, followed by the arrival of the food, and while we are eating, he will introduce the Third Class medalists. A small break; dessert, if I had to guess; followed by the Second Class medalists, who will give lengthier speeches."

"Followed by Potter and I," grumbles Severus. He has not seen Potter since that terrible day at the Ministry, and Percy's interaction with the Dementor had taken a far greater precedence than Potter's anger at the Minister's nomination of his hated professor. He cannot imagine that the last month had made the boy any more reconciled to the fact that they would be honoured together, standing side by side. It would undoubtedly turn out to be some sort of sick joke; the Fates liked to dangle Potter in front of him, as if to remind him of Lily and James all at once.

Percy nods. "By this time we will all have champagne, so we may toast you. The Minister will force you to stay throughout the next hour of socialising, and then we can sneak off and come home."

Severus stills, just slightly. Perhaps it had been said casually...surely the boy did not think of hs house as...

"I will not leave your side, during said socialising," Percy ventures tentatively, clearly noticing Severus' reaction.

As usual, the knowledge that Percy watched him so carefully sharpens his tone when he replies, "I am not a *child* in need of a chaperone." A pause, then softer, "But I would… appreciate your familiarity with the appropriate conversational topics."

Severus bites down on his jaw, a muscle jumping in his cheek, as Percy's eyebrows go up in visible surprise before a careful look of neutrality wipes away any signs of his personality. It has been so long since Severus has seen this look from Percy that it—angers him to see it again, though of course Percy does not *owe* Severus anything as asinine as an unguarded expression.

"Let us go, then," Percy says, checking his watch again. Severus knows that this is the watch that Molly Weasley gave to Percy for his seventeenth birthday, but as he has done many times before, prevents himself from asking after the boy's mother. By mutual agreement, they do not discuss each other's parents.

He sets his glass down in the sink—Severus absently casts a cleaning charm and directs the pair of glasses float back into the cabinet, so that they need not worry about them upon their return—and then walks back to the main parlour, his back straightening with each step and his stride lengthening, until he looks far more like the man that Severus had partnered with to destroy the Dark Lord, rather than the querulous and tremulous boy that had taken residence in Severus' house for the past month.

"One hour of *socialising*," Severus grumbles to himself, so that he does not have to think about how pathetically relieved he is to see the Percy with whom he is familiar return. *It will be better for him to leave, and sooner rather than later*, he reminds himself firmly as he lifts the wards on the Floo. He had not wanted to accept the Minister's offer that they Floo directly into the Minister's office before making their way to the gala, but Severus had thought, at the time, that doing so would prevent Percy from having to explain to anyone why he was being escorted by another wizard.

"It will be *fine*, Severus," Percy emphasises. "Speech; dinner; socialising; we make an early exit; home. People are curious to hear your story, but most people have already formed their own opinions."

"Speech, dinner, socialising, exit," Severus repeats. With two long fingers, he rubs at the bridge of his nose. Even so, he cannot prevent himself from sending a subtle look to Percy from underneath his hand, which the other man luckily seems to miss. His mouth is dry as he says, "And then…home."

You have no claim to him, Severus tells himself harshly as Percy steps through the Floo. Percy seems to not be interested in having Severus for a friend, for all Severus had indicated otherwise, and so Severus has to respect his thoughts on the matter. It will be far better for Percy to have friends of his own age, friends that are not marked by darkness in their souls, and Severus will do neither of them any favours by ignoring that fact.

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They time it nearly perfectly, or so Percy mutters in an undertone as they step through the boundaries of wizard-space in the atrium and arrive into bedlam. The reason for this becomes clear: the reporters only begin to rush at them before they are distracted by the arrival of Potter and his carry-ons. It would be comical to witness the vicious about-face they all engage in as if performing a synchronised dance, if Severus was not already on the verge of cursing them all. When he glances at Percy, to his left, the other man's face is pale and his eyes are wide. Severus maintains a grim hold on his wand and glowers at any reporters that might wish to try their luck with the pair.

Despite Percy's clear shock at seeing so many people so abruptly after the quiet of the atrium outside, he is able to collect his wits long enough to lead Severus expertly through the crowd, keeping to the sides of the magically constructed room and weaving in and out of towers of food, drink, and everything in between. Severus is impressed both at the adept way that Percy manages to avoid garnering attention and at the spectacle of consumables and consumers that crush into the room. Percy had mentioned that the gala was creating a small controversy due to its exorbitant cost, but Severus had not quite pictured *this*.

It seems like all of Wizarding Britain is packed into the room, all in gaudy, bright colours, all verging already toward drunk, all loud and shrill and excited. Flashing lights, colourful statues, house elf servants popping in and out in a dizzying dance of movement…Severus is pathetically grateful for the opportunity to hide beneath a rotating display of pumpkin juice and raise a silent Notice Me Not.

At Severus' unspoken look, Percy shakes his head. "They are not always like this," he says dryly, the stiffness of his body belying some of the forced disinterest in his voice. "Scrimgeour is eager to impress everyone, I'd reckon."

Severus tenses when, a few minutes later, the two oldest Weasleys manage to find them. Severus had felt a subtle resistance to his Notice Me Not; there were very strong wards woven into the wizard-space, which he reluctantly admits is not a terrible precaution, given the confluence of people in the room that fought on both sides of the war. Only the most simple spells would be permitted, under the wards.

Yet both Weasleys greet him politely and turn to their younger brother warmly. Severus watches them interact with some interest; Percy is technically older than both of them, but neither of them are presumably aware of that fact. Severus is not particularly familiar with sibling relationships, but he wonders now if they feel some measure of protectiveness toward Percy, similar to how Percy so clearly feels for *his* younger siblings. They had not had much contact during the war, as far as Severus knows, but Charles had contributed meaningfully to the escape routes, and William has been working closely with the goblins in Amos' absence. Yet neither have visited Percy at his new residence, though Severus had granted him permission (grudgingly) to reveal to both where he lived.

"Why, hello, Daniel," Percy greets the third, a tall, slender boy with dark hair and an aristocratic tilt to his shoulders. Pureblood, foreign, wealthy, Severus can tell at a glance. After so many years of mingling with them at the Dark Lord's skirts, Severus can pick this type out of a crowd.

Severus is surprised to see how warmly Daniel smiles back at Percy. "Congratulations on your work during the war. It's excellent to see you again."

Even Percy's old classmates were satisfying their curiosity by gaping at him from afar; Severus had noted several of the old Gryffindors in Percy's year in a furious huddle, throwing glances at the group but not making any move to greet their old house-mate. Severus cannot recall this Daniel, nor remember Percy ever mentioning him.

But Percy does not seem to be looking at Daniel, even as Daniel looks at him and Severus curiously. Instead, he is staring with narrowed eyes at Charles, who manages to look both

mischievous and guilty at the same time. It is a look that Severus is more familiar with on the infernal twins; Charles had always been perfectly polite in his class, not particularly talented at Potions, but respectful and conscientious nevertheless. "You *didn't*," Percy breathes, and Severus flinches automatically at the pleased vigour in Percy's voice, something that he has not heard for many weeks.

"I did," Charles says proudly, and with an abrupt, defiant gesture, he slips his hand into Daniel's. "Mum said she was *pleased to meet him* and invited him to the next Weasley dinner."

"Well done," Percy says honestly as Severus relaxes his grip on his wand, only to step forward again quickly when Charles lunges at Percy. Yet is only a hug, and Severus tries to disguise the movement as an attempt to grab a goblet of pumpkin juice.

(Severus had spent years finely tuning his reflexes to a point where even the slightest rustle of wind against grass would be enough to alert him to a change in the currents, where another's magic sliding against his would feel like a rock dropped into a moving river, where the subtle fizz of wards buzzing into being would scald against his skin. In this room, Severus has already noticed several groups that may move to violence if the mood strikes him, and several more potential exits, and the small group of Slytherins that may be counted on to come to his aid if a duel broke out unexpectedly. He had not thought to factor in physical affection.)

Severus listens with half an ear as Percy congratulates Charles on his successful coup before turning his attention on William, who is apparently engaged to the French Triwizard Champion. Severus nods to himself. He had been impressed with the girl, who had plainly decided to excel at magic to spite everyone who had dared believe her nothing more than a beautiful ingénue. Her ingredient preparation, at the very least, had been immaculate.

He forces himself to refocus as the Minister begins a pompous, overblown speech welcoming them all to the future. Severus cannot entirely prevent a sneer; he does not hate Scrimgeour as he hated his predecessor, but he cannot say anything more positive about the man than that he is a skilled politician and a formidable opponent. Severus does not believe there is any value in an event such as this; the predominant activities of the attendees seem to include gossiping in small clusters, gleefully devouring the free provisions, and rushing the celebrity guests, Potter among them.

Though, Severus has to notice, Potter looks less than pleased to have so many adoring fans trying to touch his scar and take photographs with him and ply him with questions about the Dark Lord. Truthfully, when Severus thinks now of Potter, he cannot summon up his old hatred with any of the same fervour, something he would have at one point though timpossible. Now when he thinks of Lily's child, he thinks only of relief that the boy lived, thereby fulfilling Severus' vow. Regardless of whether Potter has outgrown the desire for fame, Ronald and the Granger girl seem to be doing an adequate job of fending off the more enthusiastic fans.

Severus would never relax during an event like this—not when there are so many people in this room who would have gladly attended his execution, and only a fraction of them have Marks on their arms—but he does make the mistake of loosening his grip on his wand, just

marginally, as Scrimgeour steps away from the microphone and conversation returns. William shares the details of his upcoming nuptials and Charles retells the story of how their mother responded to his unexpected paramour. The elder Weasleys are competent wizards and their bulky presence is, he hopes, enough to ward away any unwanted attention.

Yet of course, only moments after Severus allows this foolish errant thought to cross his mind, the group of Gryffindors he had indexed immediately upon entering the room begin to make their mutinous way over to Percy. Severus glances askance at Percy, but he is deeply embroiled in a discussion with William about which Prewett family heirloom might be suitable for Fleur to wear at the wedding. Severus shifts and then coughs, when the shift is insufficient, and William glances over with a surprised look, as if he'd forgotten that Severus was even there.

"We'd love to have you at the wedding, Professor," he says after a barely perceptible pause. "If you think you'd be able to stomach so many Weasleys in one place."

Severus stiffens, but Percy gives him a swift glance from under his eyelashes, and Severus forces himself to realise that there was no cruelty in William's words, merely hesitation. "We shall see."

Percy begins to frown, noticing the insistent edge in Severus' demeanour, but he does not turn his head quickly enough, and so the arrival of his classmates comes as a visible surprise. Severus sees the flash of discomfort tremble his lips before he stiffens his face and inclines his head graciously. "Mariana, Henry, Oliver." A beat that triggers Severus' mental alarm charms. "Theodora."

"So you're here," says Theodora, viciously. Severus searches in his memory for her, but she had not left a particularly strong impact in school—Muggleborn, he remembers, born in Germany, yet her parents had made the eminently sensible decision not to send her to one of the closer schools. "Funny to see you all dolled up, Percy."

Severus glowers at the girl, who notices his ire and wilts just marginally, though not enough. A few years away from Hogwarts makes all graduates foolishly assured of their own competence and dulls the impact of those seven years of respect he had wrestled from them, one way or another.

"Theodora," Percy replies, his back straight and his head in the air, every inch a pureblood of good breeding. "You look very nice as well."

Theodora scoffs, loudly, and Charles intercedes, his voice firm. "Percy, I don't suppose you would introduce us to your friends?"

Percy makes the introductions quickly, his eyes never leaving Theodora's. Severus notices also how Percy angles his body away from the other boy, the Steelefellow heir, the Head Boy in Percy's year. Old jealousies, perhaps? But the rigidity in Percy's back suggests more than mere embarrassment over a childhood squabble.

"Good to see you alive," says the boy, viciously. The third girl—Mariana Merriweather, if Severus remembers correctly—sends him a disappointed look but does not intercede. Severus

notes the sparkling diamond on her finger and rolls his eyes. He had seen many disappointed looks sent from the wives of pureblood heirs, but very few of them had ever had any impact. “I heard that you *personally apologised* to Lord Greengrass for your role in Landon’s death. I wasn’t expecting to hear you admit it.”

“Henry—”

Severus notes Percy’s expression with distaste. His eyes are wide and blinking, and he looks impossibly *guilty*, though Severus had assured him that the Greengrass boy had been playing a reckless and dangerous game, and nothing Percy could have done would have changed the outcome of his bravery one iota, save for kidnapping him and removing him forcibly from the French Ministry.

“The nerve of you, to show up here,” Henry snarls, and Theodora nods fiercely.

“I hope it was worth it,” she says, her voice full of ugly malice, and Percy flinches as if this mere imprint of a person were his most beloved bosom friend. “I hope you can sleep at night, Percy.”

Severus would have been gratified to see the wands pulled by both Charles and William if he had not been intent on pulling his own, taking a step forward, his face a terrible study in rage. But a third voice stills them all, a quiet, almost mocking voice that Severus remembers well from school. “I have a suggestion for a jolly good mattress, if you’re struggling to sleep, Percy.”

Mathilda Lysander: only child of Lewin Lysander before his wife passed away in childbirth. Lewin would have much preferred Mathilda to be a different sort of child; male, for one, and with the sort of stocky athleticism that had allowed Lewin to entertain delusions of sporting grandeur. Even among the Slytherin circles, where parental neglect was considered a sensible child-rearing practice and physical punishment was *de rigueur,* Lewin had been whispered about for his cruelty to his only child, the likes of Lucius Malfoy pursing his lips over a glass of chilled wine.

Severus had not known that Percy and Mathilda would have known each other, though Severus cannot say he disapproves of the friendship. Mathilda would be a good match for Percy, though Lewin would not accept anything less than a wealthy Slytherin heir, preferably of the same ilk as Lewin, though just subservient enough to allow his father-in-law to dominate his life without affording anyone else the same privilege.

Percy’s face is interesting as he regards Mathilda: surprise, and a sliver of fondness, and a sort of brightness among the eyes that Severus cannot identify the cause of nor understanding. Perhaps he is merely relieved that somebody came to his defence. “Hallo, Mathilda.”

Theodora scoffs again, more loudly this time, and Severus would have raised a privacy charm if William had not beaten him to it. “One wonders why you were even a Gryffindor.”

Mathilda looks at Theodora coolly as if the girl were scum beneath her pointed heels. Severus can understand the sentiment. He looks around for Minerva, but she has joined Granger and

Weasley in defending Potter. “What did he do to you, then? What great act of cruelty are you hoping to learn was *worth it*?”

“He tortured me,” spit out Theodora poisonously, and Percy flinches visibly. “He tortured Henry, and he got Landon *killed*.”

“I see.” Mathilda turns to Percy and raises an eyebrow. “So you made it in the ranks, I hear. A spy, they say. That would have taken more bravery than I thought you had in you.”

Percy accepts the compliment wanly, his eyes still dragging on his old classmates.

“I wonder if these three quite understand the purpose of a spy,” Mathilda continues, her voice light. “I imagine that you passed quite a bit of illicit information to the beloved Order of the Phoenix, not to mention that you helped to spirit away quite a few people. My roommate thanks you, by the way; she’s engaged to be married, which she couldn’t have done, if her fiancé had been killed."

“You knew that was me?”

Mathilda gives Percy an exasperated glare. “I take it your skills for subterfuge improved,” she says with an imperious toss of her glistening hair. “I woke up having been *Obliviated*, with my last memory my decision to throw myself at your feet and ask you for help, and a note in your handwriting in my pocket. Yes, I knew it was you.”

“So you helped a Slytherin,” says Henry, his voice dark and angry. “But you couldn’t help any of us.”

Mathilda gives Severus a look filled with commiseration. “Hallo, Professor Snape. I never appreciated how much *dimmer* some of these Gryffindors were, compared to us. I rather think they wanted Percy to fly around on his little broom and personally rescue every Muggleborn that had the misfortune to face a Snatcher. That’s what you did, didn’t you?” This she directs to Charles, who looks surprised to be spoken to by a Slytherin. “Don’t get me wrong, Weasley, I was quite impressed to read how effective that strategy was, but I don’t think Percy would have survived more than a few days had he attempted the same.”

Charles clears his throat but manages to say dryly, “Well, Percy never was good at flying.”

“You don’t have to defend me,” says Percy darkly to his brother and to Mathilda. “They’re right.”

“No, idiot, they’re wrong,” Mathilda says crisply. “So you tortured them a bit. I imagine it wasn’t a very good attempt at torture, unless you grew a backbone after we stopped working together. I imagine that you were forced to torture them, either to win the trust of the Dark Lord or to forestall some inevitable Gryffindor declaration or ultimatum.”

“He used the *Cruciatus*—”

“—so did my father, when Lucius Malfoy told me that I wasn’t *suitable* to present to the Dark Lord for a Mark,” Mathilda says coldly. Theodora takes a visible step back, surprised at

the sudden ice in Mathilda's voice. "At the time, I was quite miffed, as you would guess. It had become abundantly clear to me that there was no future for me at the Ministry, not if the Minister of Magic himself had more appreciation for my skirts than my mind. How long did it take you to decide just to marry *him* instead of pursuing a career?" Mathilda tilts her head toward Mariana, who blinks rapidly but does not respond. "I thought that perhaps the Malfoy family would sponsor me, since they clearly were willing to sponsor a Weasley, but it turns out that the Death Eaters had no use for women, not unless they were Bellatrix Lestrange, and we all know how *that* turned out."

"You can thank Percy for that," Severus cannot help but say, though it causes a ripple of shock to pass through the group. "What was it, Percy—you killed her while disguised as a Death Eater when she was threatening your family, and you managed to pin it on yet another Death Eater, one who was impersonating a high-ranking Ministry official?"

"Not exactly," Percy mumbles, his ears beginning to flush, but nobody seems to take any notice of his denial. Severus stands back in satisfaction as the Gryffindors, Weasleys brothers included, exchange surprised looks.

"Well done," Matilda says, surprised. She turns back to Theodora, her eyebrows raised. "You wanted to know if it was worth it. Do you know who the first Muggleborn to receive an Order of Merlin of any kind was? Lily Potter, and the Minister awarded her it posthumously a few days ago, presumably so he doesn't have to decide which of you lot ought to be the *first.* Do you know how many women have received the award? Thirteen. Do you know how many female Ministers there have been? One, and Minister Bagnold only managed to get elected because she pretended she would be content to be some kind of figurehead. Even that you've been invited to this type of gala shows that it was worth it, *Theodora*, and if you disagree that it took a war to get to this point, you've less of a grasp on the history of the Wizarding World than you think you do."

Lily had—

Scrimgeour had—

Why had he not been *told?*

Theodora begins to hotly reply, but Mariana tugs her away with a rough yank of her arm. "Enough," Mariana hisses, and Theodora turns large, betrayed eyes on the girl. Severus snorts to himself, though he is satisfied when Mariana turns back to Percy, formally inclines her head, and says, "Thank you, Percy."

"Thank *you*," says Percy to Mathilda after the three Gryffindors disappear. Severus crosses his arms and gives her a pleased nod, forcing his shock down at the news about Lily. Mathilda had been one of his favourite students, perhaps because he could understand her desperate drive to prove herself without resorting to cheap cruelty or cheating, and she had comported herself with the dignity befitting Slytherin house.

Mathilda grins at Percy, clearly pleased at her victory. "Well, I figured I owed you one. Let me know when you're back at the Ministry, will you? Scrimgeour said you were taking a

leave of absence for your health, but you look fine to me, though a bit touched in the head, letting your classmates talk to you like that."

Percy rolls his eyes and waves them off, but as they move to take their seats, the lights in the atrium dimming to indicate the Minister is going to speak, he has a small smile lingering at the corner of his lips.

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The first two hours of the gala pass precisely as Percy had predicted, with the notable exception that he is not called up to the stage to receive an Order of Merlin, Third Class, nor a Second Class either. The omission makes it very hard indeed for Percy to focus on anything other than his own rising dread. He stares fiercely at Scrimgeour as he heartily congratulates each recipient, says a few brief words about their accomplishments, and then allows them to share their own thoughts, but Scrimgeour ignores him entirely, forcefully, though Percy has been consigned to a table at the very front of the room. Severus is to his right and Charlie to his left, but across the table from Percy is Harry, who looks dashing in charcoal robes yet seems to be the most nervous, staring down at his golden-rimmed plate with a sullen, faraway expression.

One by one, Percy's siblings, coworkers, and old schoolmates stand to receive their award. Theodora receives a Third Class medal for her work in allying with the Muggles to protect some of the Muggle families of the Undesirables; she glances involuntarily at Percy before smiling out at the crowd. Cedric receives a thunderous round of applause for his mentorship of the D.A., dwarfed only by the cheering and hollering that accompany Neville, Luna, and Ginny when they stand together, blushing, as the Minister commends them warmly for their bravery. Oliver and Charlie demonstrate a brightly glowing map of the major flight routes they used to ferry people across Europe, which Percy finds quite interesting, considering he'd seen the other side of it: all the messages from foreign Ministers, the meetings that Pius hadn't attended, the gossip that spread over the Ministry like a soft-spun web. *France is turning a blind eye to Muggleborn refugees. Romania will accept you if you prove you fought against the Dark Lord. Spain seems to be crawling with supporters of You Know Who.*

Despite himself, Percy relaxes some as the night winds on, predictable and orderly. Speech after speech after speech. It warms him, a little, to hear of everyone who helped in some way against the Dark Lord; it makes him feel marginally less alone, and marginally better about his choice to wind back through time. Scrimgeour certainly had died in the first timeline, and Charlie had not allied with Oliver, and there had been no concept of safe routes, at least not that Percy had ever learned about from his family or the Ministry. These changes cannot be directly attributed to *him*, but still. His shoulders retreat from their forced march toward his ears with each new course, each new toast. Even the earlier upset of Mariana, Henry, and Theodora is softened, slightly, by all the rest of it.

He even smiles at the sight of Yaxley, smugly accepting an award, followed by Draco and then Andromeda, a small but crucial group of Slytherins that merit a surprisingly enthusiastic

reception. Yaxley catches his eye and Percy raises his glass despite himself, a small smirk emerging as Yaxley winks exaggeratedly at him. Yaxley has always been a bloody idiot, but Percy thinks that perhaps the other man is not angry at him, despite Percy's deception, particularly as Yaxley has emerged quite heroically as a result.

"Quite a spectacle," Severus mutters to himself as Ron and Hermione receive a standing ovation for their unwavering support and loyalty to the Boy Who Lived. After their joint speech, several people are dabbing their eyes fondly, and Harry is crimson red in his seat. But Percy does not hear a hard edge in Severus' tone, nor a bite of derision. Perhaps he, like Percy, cannot help but be warmed just slightly by the affair.

And it *is* a spectacle. Tables groaning with food, light, delicate bites to precede the main meal; floating towers of glasses of all shapes and sizes, like crystal chandeliers in the air; and everywhere Percy looks, witches and wizards in their best robes, talking, glittering with jewellery. House elves in neatly pressed towels, whisking discarded silverware away with a snap of their fingers. The room is larger than a Quidditch pitch, and every bit of the floor and the walls and the richly patterned ceiling are covered with decorations, or so it seems. This style is not quite to *his* taste, but this gala is for the masses, and the masses are gleefully indulging in as much free food and drink as they can swallow.

Scrimgeour preens at the front of the room as he awards each medal, looking to Percy like an enormous feathered bird in monstrous emerald robes. His effusive hair and beard are neatly groomed, and he's even trimmed his imposing eyebrows. Percy can tell even at a distance that Scrimgeour has put pains into his appearance; his skin shines with the pale sheen of a face-evening charm, something that typically looks a bit odd in person, but yields great dividends when photographed.

Then, a brief break; Severus strides away the moment that the Minister releases them for dessert, which leaves Percy feeling a bit amusedly resigned. Harry disappears seconds later—managing to evade the crush of people descending on their table—and Percy has the sudden image of the two of them comparing notes in the men's loo, or helping each other to flee. He would go after Severus, but given he has no way of locating the man (and given Severus ought to know that) he stays put at the table, accepting the small plate of desserts that Ron brings back for him.

"He'll be back, Hermione," says Ron over his shoulder as he hands the plate to Percy. Percy examines its contents: small delicate chocolate truffles, precisely what he would have chosen from the bountiful array of sweets. It's an odd feeling to know that Ron had chosen correctly.

Hermione slides into the seat next to Percy, turning her head away from some of her old classmates who seem keen to catch her attention. "We did just fine," she huffs, picking at a delicate raspberry tart. "I *told* Harry. All he needs to do is smile, accept the medal, say a few words, and move on."

"Well, not everyone has your gift for speeches," Ron teases, and Hermione manages a smile amongst the worried scowl tightening her brow.

"I drafted *four* separate options for Harry," she grumbles. Percy snorts to himself. It does not sound like Harry has improved his mood, or at least not where his friends were concerned.

His snort must have been more audible than he'd intended, for Ron takes the seat next to Percy and leans in conspiratorially. "You're not going to flee too, are you?"

"I don't think I shall be giving a speech," says Percy archly, and with some relief. (And a tiny flare of regret, now that he is here, and people are not casting stones at the sight of his presence. Perhaps he ought to have just accepted a small award without argument, so people would not wonder why he was the only Weasley child to not be honoured. Even *Bill* had received a medal for his post-war negotiations with the goblins.)

Ron and Hermione exchange a glance. "Really?" Hermione begins, but Ron cuts her off with a brisk shake of his head. Percy narrows his eyes at his brother, his instincts tingling, but Ron changes the topic with a grace that Percy would not have once expected from his youngest brother.

"We're going back to Hogwarts," he explains to Percy. "Tomorrow. Harry too, we hope."

"He does not wish to return?" Percy asks, surprised. Unbidden, Tom's voice curls into his mind, the note of longing, the barely repressed awe. *Hogwarts, how I have missed you.*

Ron shrugs, exchanging another look with Hermione, though one significantly less guarded. "He wants to charge off and join the Aurors, we reckon."

Hermione exhales sharply. "I *told* him that he would need excellent NEWT scores to be accepted into the program, but the Minister offered to waive the entry examinations for all of us."

"*Really*." Percy is both surprised and not to hear the news. He respects Scrimgeour and quite likes him, when Scrimgeour is not pressuring Percy into public affairs against his will, but the man is a bona fide politician and makes no apology for it. It would be quite advantageous to have the Boy Who Lived and any of his friends join the Auror force. Why bother with the NEWTs?

Both Hermione and Ron silence themselves abruptly a second later when Harry returns to the table, his face impassive and determined. He looks like he is going to war again, and something pulls inside Percy's chest.

"Speak to Ron and Hermione," Percy says, unbidden. Harry glances at him, but not angrily, and Percy can spot the undercurrent of anxiety underneath his prickly exterior. "Ginny's at the same table, on the opposite side. Speak to them and ignore everyone else."

Harry does not acknowledge the advice, but Ron does, and he gently ribs Harry about the upcoming speech, telling Harry that he'll feign a heart attack if Harry goes too far off the rails. Hermione adds crisply that she can manage a widespread Notice Me Not, if it becomes necessary, and finally Harry seems to relax some into himself, though the hardness snaps over his face again when Severus returns to the table, looking similarly uncomfortable.

To Severus, Percy says in an undertone, "Speech, socialising, exit, home," which is all he dares say in such a crowded environment. The words had worked on Severus back at

Severus' house, which is something that Percy would like to think about, later, in the privacy of his bed.

"Many of you know Severus Snape for his long tenure at Hogwarts," Scrimgeour begins when the lights have dimmed again and the only sound in the room comes from the soft clink of spoons against dessert plates. "Indeed, any Hogwarts student who had Severus grace the front of his classroom would be hard-pressed to forget him. Many of us know too the story of Severus from the first war: the late Headmaster Dumbledore came forward after the first defeat of the Dark Lord to reveal that Severus had been working as a spy. But what Severus and Albus did not reveal was that they suspected the Dark Lord had not been permanently vanquished, only temporarily defeated."

The entire hall is still, caught in the Minister's words. Even Percy, who knows the story better than most, feels a shiver snake its way down his spine.

"And so Albus and Severus concocted a plan. Severus would continue to position himself close to the centre of the Dark Lord's power, so that when he returned, he would be able to resume his position of spy. Make no mistake," Scrimgeour says before his voice raises into a firm, authoritative roar, "This was not an easy sacrifice for Severus. For fifteen years, he accepted our suspicion, our abuse, our scorn, working behind the scenes to lay the preparations for the trap, driven only by his own convictions and the plans he formed with Albus Dumbledore. Once the Dark Lord returned, he played an immensely dangerous game, passing valuable information to the Order of the Phoenix while deceiving the most powerful Dark wizard of our time."

Percy can feel Severus tense, the anxiety and irritation visibly emanating from his taut frame as the Minister attempts to summarise his life. Warring with himself, Percy presses his foot against Severus' in a weak attempt to lend support.

"Albus Dumbledore was injured gravely after the fight against the Dark Lord in the Ministry, after the Night of the Dementors," Scrimgeour continues gravely and entirely truthfully. Whispers break out around the room, and Severus stiffens further, as if each whisper were a brand upon his skin. Across the table, Harry is looking down at his plate, his body visibly tense and upset. "He was going to die at the end of the year, so he and Severus decided to use his death to their joint advantage. With his death, Albus would provide Severus with the opportunity to prove his loyalty to the Dark Lord, and Severus would spare Albus the pain of being tortured by the Dark Lord. Severus planned to ask for control of Hogwarts for his reward, so that he could protect the students to the best of his ability. The plan worked perfectly; as we all mourned the loss of Albus Dumbledore, Severus began working toward defeating the Dark Lord once and for all. He risked his life repeatedly to aid the Order, despite their distrust of him, and he aided in the destruction of the life wards augmenting the Dark Lord's power. Without a shadow of a doubt, I say that we all owe our lives and our peace to him, and we thank him for his service. Please rise, Severus Snape, and accept the highest honour our society can bestow."

Severus for a long second does not move. Only when the whispers have begun to break out does Percy nudge Severus forcefully. "*Go,"* he whispers, nearly soundlessly. Severus' eyes

meet Percy's, wide and staring, and Percy presses his foot more firmly against Severus'. "You deserve this, Severus."

Severus inhales, his nostrils flaring, and when he exhales his face is perfectly smooth. He rises from the table, his back perfectly straight, and nearly glides across the room, mounting each step to the dais with a steady, authoritative step. By the time he has reached the podium, he looks perfectly in control of himself, and in fact a little bored, as if he received medals each day. There is a resigned look of amusement on Harry's face, when Percy glances over to gauge his reaction, and Percy has to admit that the sight of Severus so imperiously standing on the stage *is* reminiscent of the days when Severus ruled over his classroom.

"Thank you, Minister," Severus says, his voice smooth as a running river, even as it is amplified across the room. "You have said the pertinent parts of the story, so I will say only this. The Dark Lord nearly won the war."

Whispers turn into mutters, and Percy sees the smile on Scrimgeour's face falter. Ron sits up and frowns at Severus, though his face is more thoughtful than upset.

"He nearly won, and he was defeated only through the persistent bravery of dozens of people: many who have spoken here today, but many more who are not being recognised. All of the parents who were able to save themselves or their children from recruitment—and make no mistake, refusing to give your children in service to the Dark Lord required bravery—weakened the Dark Lord's army and spread doubt and fear among the ranks. All of the Death Eaters who defied the Dark Lord's orders, in their own way." Severus pauses, and his eyes flicker briefly to Percy's. "Those who fought their own private battles." Over the loud murmuring of the crowd, Severus concludes, "We must not forget that we are lucky to have peace, and that peace was not assured."

It takes nearly four heartbeats of silence before Scrimgeour realises that Severus has finished. With a hasty look at Julian—Percy is amused to see his old assistant, resplendent in robes that are not quite suitable for his thin, weedy frame—Scrimgeour steps up to pin the medal on Severus' breast and shake his hand.

Severus returns to his seat and raises a pained eyebrow at Percy, who gives him a short nod. Perhaps his speech was unconventional, but Percy cannot disagree with the point that Severus had made, nor fault him for wishing to speak to the quiet bravery of those presumed to fall in line automatically with the Dark Lord.

Scrimgeour introduces Harry with a far more effusive and flowery speech, perhaps to gloss over some of the unease that Severus' words had loosed into the crowd. Harry ascends the steps grimly, looking as if he were attending his own funeral, though Percy is gratified to see him fix his eyes on Ron and Hermione to assuage his nerves.

"I have been fighting Lord Voldemort—or Tom Riddle, as he ought to be known—since I was eleven," Harry says shortly, his amplified voice echoing through the room. "I battled him three times at Hogwarts, once at the Ministry, and once at the graveyard of his father, and I barely escaped each attempt with my life."

The room is quiet. Everyone in attendance has read of Harry's exploits in the paper, formed their own opinions of him, but they've never heard anything from Harry's own mouth.

"I never felt as though I had a choice," Harry continues evenly, the sentences short and clipped. "He targeted me because my parents dared to defy him. He threatened everything I hold dear. I never wanted to be the Chosen One, but Voldemort chose me, and so I felt I had to respond."

Harry pauses and adjusts his glasses, turning his attention away from Ron and toward Ginny. "But somebody recently reminded me that I was not the only person who felt they did not have a choice. Those of you who were forced to flee did not have a choice. Those of you who were forced to follow Voldemort did not have a choice. Those of you who were frightened for their lives did not have a choice. I learned at the very end that Tom never felt like he had a choice, either."

Harry, for all his nerves, is a powerful speaker, and the room seems to inhale and exhale as one, in time with Harry's breaths between words.

"But at the same time, we all had choices," says Harry softly. "I could have chosen to run away. My friends could have chosen to abandon me instead of risking their lives for me. Everyone who received an award today could have chosen to let Voldemort be someone else's problem." Harry hesitates and then says grudgingly, "Professor Snape could have chosen not to spy for Dumbledore, or Dumbledore could have chosen not to trust him, or me, or anyone in the Order."

Now Harry's voice changes, as if he were deviating from his script. "I was the last person to speak to Dumbledore, I think," he says, and a sigh ripples through the room. "And he told me something I've never forgotten." Harry mimics Dumbledore's voice unconsciously as he says, " *It is our choices that show who we really are, far more than our abilities*. As Professor Snape said, we were so close to losing the war. The only reason we won is because of everyone who chose to fight, rather than to give up." Harry flushes, suddenly, and seems far more the eighteen year old that he is, rather than the adult that Percy had seen peek through, soon to emerge forever. "I just wanted to remind everyone of that," Harry says hastily, and then he steps away from the podium to thunderous applause.

Harry returns to the table, sporting a matching medal to Severus, and Percy watches in astonishment as the two of them exchange perhaps the only look they'd ever shared devoid of hatred.

Speech, socialising, home, thinks Percy, watching as Severus turns to his half-drunk glass of champagne in bemusement. Percy wants to smile, or burst into laughter, or perhaps tears. It strikes him suddenly that Severus had *lived* where before he had died, that perhaps he'd never lived to have Lily's son thank him, even obliquely, for the choices that he'd made. This, despite everything, makes Percy feel warm, like at least part of this last horrid decade was worth it, to see Severus at this table with Harry, and Fred and George sitting side by side next to Ginny across the room.

Percy is preparing to leave the table, laying his silverware side by side on the plate and folding his napkin on top, when Scrimgeour steps up to the podium again.

"We have one more person to honour," he says, and all of Percy's good cheer deserts him as everyone at his table tries very hard not to look at him. Traitors, all of them. "This person insisted he not be given an Order of Merlin, and I respected his choices, though I disagreed with them. But this individual gave several years of his life in service; he saved my life, and the lives of countless others in this room; and he acted with integrity to protect the Ministry, when he could. Therefore, it is my great honour to call Percival Weasley-Prewett up to the stage, so that he may receive the inaugural Order of the Ministry, to hereafter be given by the Minister to an individual who has significantly and meaningfully contributed to the well-being or advancement of our society. Percy, would you come to the stage?"

Percy barely hears these last words; his heart is pounding, beating with wet fleshy thuds in his ears, and his face is burning, burning, burning. His mind is blank, so blank that he cannot think of anything, other than the plate in front of it with its dirty fork and spoon and folded napkin, and the heat of Severus' body beside him as he shifts uncomfortable, and the nudge that Charlie is insistently pressing against his shoulder.

The Minister dared—

He *dared*—

Percy can't do it. He can't do it. He can't get up on that stage and accept an award that the Minister *made up just for him*, an award that has no history nor precedent, an award of dubious validity—

He does not deserve any sort of award at all—

Let alone an award bestowed directly by the Minister—

Percy is drowning, and he looks around him with wide, panicked eyes, and for some reason his eyes land on Harry's, who is sitting opposite him, and staring at him with the same surprise that Percy feels mirrored on his own face. Harry, of course, will oppose the award; Harry will agree with Percy that he ought to slink out in shame, rather than going up to the stage; Harry will—

"Go," says Harry, and something in his voice changes, some quirk of his lips or relaxing of his brow, until Harry looks far more like the boy that Percy had shared a Common Room with for three years, the boy that Percy had guarded from afar, the boy that Percy had led knowingly to his death.

Percy feels frozen to his seat. Dozens, *hundreds* of eyes pierce him, shatter him, make him feel as though they can see directly into the centre of his being, his ripped, diseased soul, his private wish to be free, the feel of Tom's lips on his—

Charlie lays his hand on Percy's shoulder, and his voice is warm when he murmurs quietly, "*Go,* Percy. You deserve to be recognised."

Ron is nodding, and Hermione, her eyes bright with tears, and even Bill and Fleur with her unfamiliar, lovely face, and Daniel with his crinkled brown eyes, and Severus, who is looking at Percy with a curious expression, one that Percy has never seen before. If Percy had to

guess—and guessing is all that Percy is capable of, in the flush of embarrassment gripping his body—he would say that Severus looks *satisfied*.

"Go," says Severus, and Percy searches for something in his dark, fathomless eyes. Understanding, or absolution, or pity, perhaps. When Percy continues to hesitate, Severus leans forward and says deliberately, his voice at his lowest, and most gravelly, "Go, Percy. Go for Myrtle, if nobody else. She'll never forgive you if you don't."

This startles Percy into a laugh, and he sees a small, self-satisfied smile ghost over Severus' lips before the other man settles back into his seat. Percy swallows heavily and fixes the image of Myrtle in his mind as he stands, the chair seeming to screech loudly with the sound of all of his pain and fear and suffering. Myrtle *would* never forgive him if he turned down an award from the Minister, and everyone deserved to know that it was a ghost who had helped Percy when he was at his lowest, and a Muggleborn librarian who had given him information via owl, and a Muggle who tracked down Dennis Bishop, and everyone in between.

Percy stands mutely as Scrimgeour outlines the details of Percy's "service": that he had spied, for many years, on Lord Voldemort and gained his trust, and that he had worked behind the scenes to mitigate the impact of the Dark Lord's orders on the Ministry. To hear Scrimgeour say it, Percy single-handedly designed the system of escape routes and saved dozens of lives by disrupting the Muggleborn trials, etcetera, etcetera, until Percy has begun to feel uncomfortable for another reason than the hundreds of eyes glued to his every move.

"I thank you, Minister," he says when Scrimgeour finally falls silent and motions him to step forward. Percy, at least, has experience with magical microphones, and he automatically adjusts himself so that he is at the optimal distance for minimum reverberation, looking out at the bright flashing lights in front of him. It is nothing more than another press conference, and Percy has moderated many of those. *For Myrtle*, he reminds himself, and then he opens his mouth and says, "Your words, while generous, do not tell the entire story." He does not turn to see the expression on Scrimgeour's face, but he can guess at its particulars. "Harry spoke of choices, and Severus of the quiet bravery of those who resisted, in their own way, what the Dark Lord desired."

Then he hesitates. The brief plan that he'd formed during the walk to the podium had been simple: he had thought perhaps he would highlight Myrtle's story, or merely thank the Minister and be done. But then standing up there, looking at all of the dozens of members in the audience, he falters. *I was the last person to speak to Dumbledore*, says Harry, and he had been the last person to speak to the Dark Lord, but Percy had been the last person to speak to Tom.

"There was nobody that Tom Riddle hated more than Albus Dumbledore," says Percy, his lips moving out of his control, and he sees a ripple of shock move around the room. "But not for the reasons that you might think. Tom had been a lonely student in Hogwarts, brilliant and clever beyond his years, but—lonely. He felt desperately that he had to prove himself, as a half-blood from an inauspicious family. He had been raised by Muggles, and he did not always feel at home in the Wizarding World. He was an orphan and did not know his family. In truth, when I think of my time at Hogwarts, I felt that I could understand his drive to prove himself, a core part of his being even before he dabbled in the Dark Arts, and I think I am not

the only one." He pauses and looks around the room, expecting open hostility, but people's expressions are interested, or thoughtful, or surprised. He swallows and continues, "Dumbledore saw Tom's potential for violence, his cruelty, and his lack of empathy early on, and he sought to mitigate Tom's impact in his own way. He offered Tom an apprenticeship at Hogwarts, but Tom viewed it as an attempt to control him. He refused Tom a teaching position at the school years later, but Tom considered it a grave personal insult. Tom felt acutely that Dumbledore had judged him unfairly, and in many ways, he grew into precisely what Dumbledore feared in part *because* Dumbledore feared it, and Tom considered Dumbledore's opinion more than anyone else's."

Percy pauses again, his palms growing clammy. He wipes them against his robes, hoping that his nervousness is not obvious, at least to the people in the back of the room. "It can be hard to defy someone's expectations of you," he admits, and he feels like he is admitting it to his mother, who is looking at him steadily, sitting next to Ginny on the opposite side of the room. "We expected an eleven year old to become our hero, and he did. We expected the Heir of Slytherin to become evil, and he did. The weight of those expectations can be—draining. We've all felt it, I think; expectations to be a certain thing, to act a certain way."

His mother raises her chin, and even from the insurmountable gulf between them, Percy feels like he can see a glimmer of understanding in her eyes.

"It takes courage and bravery and determination to defy those expectations," he finishes, feeling suddenly very tired, as if he had run out of steam. "Tom never quite managed it. But at the same time, it provides us an opportunity. If we expect great things from each other, we can accomplish them. I helped to destroy the Dark Lord, even though it was the most difficult thing I have ever done. I didn't manage it because I was brave, or because I was desperate, or because I always had the conviction that I was doing the right thing. I was able to defy the Dark Lord because I had people who believed in me, even when I was going down the wrong path, who expected better of me. I had mentors who pulled me away when I had to study Dark Magic to help defeat the life wards that Tom created. I had family who supported me, even when I had to publicly disdain them and hurt them. I had friends who reminded me of their friendship, even when the Dark Lord isolated me. Some of these friends were Death Eaters—people who had mistakenly followed the Dark Lord, whether out of idiocy or desperation, and were trapped in a nightmare of their own making. Some of these were my former classmates, or members of the Order. I was surrounded by people in the Ministry who were determined *do their jobs*, even when it seemed impossible, people that kept the heating charms active and the storefronts open."

He pauses here; to his surprise, his mother's eyes are wet, almost as if she were on the verge of tears. He is suddenly aware that the vast room is very quiet, and that everyone is watching him, as if entranced. Kathleen, from Accounting, catches his eye and gives him a slow nod of acknowledgement, though of course they had spent most of the year at odds with each other.

"I was not the most important person in this war," continues Percy, his voice soft. "But I believe I had a unique perspective, both into the resistance and the Death Eaters. If there was one thing I would hope that we take away from the war, it is that everyone needs people to believe in them, to pull them away from darkness, to give them second chances. To expect great things from each other, rather than to expect the worst. Even Tom Riddle; even Albus

Dumbledore; even I. If we do not remember that, we will see this happen again and again and again."

Feeling supremely awkward, Percy steps back from the podium, gives a little bow to the Minister, and stands still as Scrimgeour pins a medal to his breast. He accepts a handshake, feeling acutely as if he were going to collapse, and then makes his way back to his seat without hearing the applause that breaks out, hesitantly at first, and then growing in volume. Had he prepared a speech, he likely would have said something very different, and indeed, when he parses back his words he is not sure he had conveyed precisely what he had intended to say.

But Harry nods at him, from across the table, and Ron smiles at him, and Charlie nudges him again, more cheerfully this time, rather than insistently. Percy does not turn to see the expression on Severus' face; he does not think he can bear to see the pity, or the disgust, or the disappointment, or whatever else the other man must be thinking after that display of blatant emotion.

To Percy's surprise, after the Minister concludes the awards ceremony and the large tables disappear, to be replaced by a glittering dance floor and a live orchestra, people seem as interested to speak to him as they are to Harry or Severus. Many of them seem curious to know what, precisely, Percy accomplished during the war; to these people, Percy repeats again and again that they ought to speak to Nymphadora Tonks or the Minister himself, as Percy really oughtn't say. However, there are some interactions that are far more difficult to bear.

Narcissa and Draco, their matching grey eyes cool and lovely as they pay their respects to Severus and then Percy. Tobias, nodding from across the room, escorting Sonali, who gives Percy a scorching, searing look. The younger Nott, Percy's old classmate, who sneers angrily at Percy and hisses under his breath that Percy should be ashamed of himself, betraying both causes and pretending that he is a hero.

And then suddenly, with Nott's words still echoing in his ears, Percy sees his parents beginning to make their way over to their small group. Percy stiffens at once, taking an unconscious step back, so that he bumps accidentally against Harry, who is hiding behind Ron, Hermione, and Ginny.

"Sorry," Percy mumbles, his eyes on his mother, who looks focused and determined. "Bathroom."

He barely notices the ripple of discontent that leaves behind him as he navigates swiftly through the crowd, turning his body away from the dozens of people who call out to him, taking quick, sure steps toward the bathroom. He ducks out of the boundaries of wizard-space, the edges of the wards rippling around him, and suddenly he is back inside the normal atrium of the Ministry, deafening in its silence, and there is a small, unobtrusive bathroom a few steps away. Percy makes for it quickly and closes the door behind him, thankful that everyone must be using the temporary bathrooms inside the enchanted area.

He should not have run; certainly Severus would have noticed his quick departure, and perhaps Ron or Charlie. His mother would have seen him flee from her presence as if he were

a frightened child.

But something about the sight of his mother approaching him had made the whole evening seem *real*, rather than a pretty, fanciful dream, where Percy puts on his best dress robes and heroically accepts an award bestowed upon him from the Minister himself. Oh, he'd been so bloody foolish. He'd pranced around the gala and accepted congratulations from people who had every right to hate him and believed in a small, selfish part of his heart that he deserved an award for his crimes. He'd given a speech all but praising Tom Riddle, all but admitting to the world that he admired the cruellest wizard of their time, and equating himself in the same breath to Tom and Dumbledore.

Percy had forgotten himself. He'd felt like a wizard again, like a powerful wizard in the Ministry, like a key soldier in the war. He'd forgotten that this was no longer his affair; that these people did not want to associate with him, would not want to associate with him, if they knew the full truth of his ripped soul and his magicless core and the despicable weakness in his heart. He'd tortured Henry because he'd been so *angry* at him, not out of some greater plan. He'd destroyed Tom because he'd thought it was a kindness, not because he was thinking of the greater good. Everything he'd done, he'd done for his own selfish desires, not because it was the right thing to do. He was no hero, like Harry, who fought for the world only out of his own courage.

And his mother knows that. His mother knows that because she could see inside him with those piercing brown eyes, the same eyes that he shared on his cowardly face, and she could see into his diseased soul. She did not want to associate with him, her middle son, because she knew how he had harmed his father and forsaken his family.

The door swings open, and Percy backs instinctively into a stall, feeling the low toilet bang against his legs. The door swings open because Percy is not a wizard, and he cannot bar the door with anything other than his own selfish wish to be alone. He is trapped in the Ministry until someone deigns to take him home, unless he wants to walk out of the Muggle entrance dressed in Wizarding robes and attempt to navigate his way home in the dark. Of all the indignities of his new half-life, having to wait around to be shepherded like a *child* is surely one of the greatest. He supposes it makes sense: what he lacks in determination and deliberation he deserves to lack in the agency to choose his own destination.

"Percy?" A voice asks hesitantly, and Percy's brow furrows as he recognises it. Harry. Why had Harry followed him? How had he found him, hidden away? Were the rest of *them* just minutes behind, ready to crowd into the bathroom and disparage or embarrass or praise Percy? For a wild second, Percy presses himself against the toilet and hopes to Merlin that Harry will leave him there alone. But he knows the Chosen One by now, and he knows that Harry is not likely to leave until he has said what he came to say. Percy listens carefully but cannot hear if another person is standing silently behind Harry.

"I used a tracking spell, but my tracking spells aren't very good," Harry admits. "But I think you are in here, given as I see your shoes under the door."

"Please go away, Harry," says Percy, feeling ashamed of his cowardice. He is hiding in the *bathroom* like a first year. He cannot imagine what Harry must be thinking of him, the big bad Death Eater turned a snivelling child.

Harry sighs. From below the stall door, Percy can just make out Harry's scuffed trainers showing beneath his luxurious robes. Perhaps nobody had taught Harry that his shoes could be seen with each swish of his robes. Percy had made that mistake, early on in his career in the first timeline, believing his new robes would hide the embarrassing state of his shoes. "I wanted to say that I was sorry."

Percy frowns and he takes a small step toward the stall door. "For what?"

"What do you mean, *for what*?" Harry's voice is incredulous, the end of the sentence catching on a small, pained laugh. "Percy, I've been a bloody git to you. To everyone, really."

"You don't have to apologise to me, Harry," Percy says, feeling suddenly very tired and very old. He sighs to himself, looking around his surroundings with some distaste. How had he ended up here, hiding in the loo at a Ministry function, talking to the Boy Who Lived? Shaking his head to himself, he steps forward to push open the stall door. There is no point in hiding from Harry, not now, Harry's anger at him be damned. "I know why you are upset at me. I should have included you in the Horcrux hunt—"

"I know what you told to Ginny," Harry interrupts. This close to Harry, Percy can see the exhaustion burrowing into the lines of his young face and hovering around the edges of his lips. "And you weren't wrong, though it took me some time to realise that. I *was* angry at you for…not including me. I was angry because I thought I needed to kill Tom, not you."

Percy shrugs one shoulder, unable to respond. He is not sure he has the energy to recite the litany of his sins again, so he is grateful, not angry, that Ginny had retold them all to Harry.

"But I think I've been angrier about more than that." Harry shifts his body away from Percy, which has the consequence of allowing him to meet his gaze in the small mirror. Percy watches as Harry stares at something in his face that Percy cannot see. "I've been really mad at Dumbledore," he admits quietly. "I tried to speak to his portrait, and all I did was shout at it."

"I've been really mad at Dumbledore, too," Percy offers, rubbing tiredly at his glasses. "But in my case, I was really just mad at myself. I can understand why you'd be upset at him, though."

Harry shakes his head, the edges of his scar gleaming from underneath his fringe. "The worst thing is that I've been feeling *bad* for Voldemort," he says, nearly silently, and Percy cannot help but make a small noise of surprised recognition before he can beat down the impulse. Harry hears the noise and smiles mirthlessly, his face hovering somewhere between childish petulance and adult understanding. "I know. He killed my parents, and so many people that I care about, but it's true. I keep thinking about what he said, at the very end."

It strikes Percy suddenly that he'd never really considered what Harry thought about Voldemort. Perhaps he viewed Voldemort like Percy viewed Tom, or at least along a similar vector, which is an odd thought to entertain.

"It's like I said in my speech, that Dumbledore never gave me any choice but to be the hero," mumbles Harry quietly, still avoiding Percy's gaze, staring instead at the mirror. "And it

seems like he didn't give Tom any choice either but to be the villain. But that can't be…I mean, if that's the case…what does that mean about Dumbledore?"

"Dumbledore was a brilliant man," Percy says quietly. "But he was flawed. Did you know that Dumbledore asked me repeatedly to give him information about what you, Ron and Hermione were up to, or what was happening at the Ministry? I never did because I was too offended that he only seemed to care about me for my proximity to you three. He asked me to join the Order, but I said no because I thought he just wanted my money. Dumbledore tried to give me chances, Harry, and I always turned them down because of my own pride. We don't know what chances he offered Tom."

"But he should have known how to ask, shouldn't he?" Harry shakes his head, his eyes flicking back to Percy's. "I mean, he was *Dumbledore.* I can't imagine he didn't know how to ask you to help without coming across as a git."

It is Percy's turn to stretch his tired lips into a humourless smile. "Dumbledore was many things, but I think he knew less about people than we always thought he did," admits Percy. "Looking back, there are so many times where it all could have gone differently. But it's impossible to see those things, even if you think you know exactly what's going to happen."

Harry exhales noisily through his nose. "I even feel bad for *Snape*," the teenager admits, and Percy has to smile despite himself at the agony in Harry's admission. "I feel bad for Snape, and I feel bad for Dumbledore, and I feel bad for Voldemort, and I feel bad for myself, too. I'm just…I'm tried of feeling bad, Percy." Harry shakes his head and laughs to himself. "Hermione, Ginny, and Ron don't seem to understand that. They think that I can just *cheer up* if I play Quidditch, or take Ginny to dinner, but it doesn't…it's not enough."

"You shouldn't beat yourself up, Harry," says Percy, fruitlessly. Then he sighs and adds, with experience, "But it is easier said than done, I know."

"Voldemort *killed my parents*," repeats Harry, as if Percy had not heard him the first time. "How can I—*pity* him, Percy? I'm—I shouldn't—it's an *insult* to their name, to their memories, to even *entertain* these kinds of thoughts. They gave their lives up for me to be a hero, not to *pity* the wizard who killed them."

"I ripped my soul, you know," says Percy, almost conversationally. "I felt so strongly about Tom that it tore open my soul for me to kill him. Trust me, Harry; pity is nothing."

"I think I tore my soul too," Harry says, his voice quieter, and for three long heartbeats they stand there in silence in the cramped Ministry loo, thinking the same thoughts. "I saw the Horcrux…inside my soul, I think. I know it sounds mental, but I *saw* it, like a *baby*, and I felt bad for it."

"What did you see?" Percy asks, curiously. "Hogwarts?"

Harry frowns at him. "Kings Cross. Why? Have you…did you see something?"

"I offered to help Tom, if he chose to try and heal himself," admits Percy, not precisely answering the question. "In those last few minutes. I would have helped him, Harry."

Harry's voice rises as he snaps, "Well, I all but offered him the same thing. How do you *deal* with it, Percy?"

"I don't," Percy snaps back combatively. "I don't. Is that what you want to hear, Harry? I don't deal with it. Part of me loved Tom Riddle, and I hate myself for that. Part of me feels proud of myself for killing him, and part of me feels disgusted that I could do that to someone I loved."

Percy waits anxiously for Harry's response, but the Boy Who Lived only deflates into himself and mumbles softly, "I guess I didn't think that war would be like this."

"What do you mean?"

Harry gives the characteristic half-shoulder shrug that Percy remembers from school. "I guess I thought Dumbledore was—my mentor, I suppose. But Ron says that I have to think of him as a general of an army. I'm not an idiot, I understand the role that Dumbledore played in the war. I'm just always…surprised to remember it."

Harry is young, Percy thinks for the hundredth time, but in moments like these, Percy does not know whether he feels younger or older than Harry. Certainly it is all Percy can do to agree softly. "Do you know what surprised me most, about—war? Or this war, at the very least?"

Harry does not ask explicitly, but he raises his heavy green eyes to Percy's. Percy thinks suddenly of the diadem shifting into Lily Evans, into the quiet resignation on Severus' face.

"Do you know why Draco Malfoy ended up with the Elder Wand?" Percy asks, ignoring the quizzical frown that crosses Harry's face. "Because Tom Riddle went to school with Abraxas Malfoy, who impressed him with his poise and good breeding. Tom was envious of Abraxas, but he favoured him and thought very highly of him. Lucius, Abraxas' son, never could live up to Tom's expectations of him, and as a consequence, would act rashly to get Tom's esteem. Many years later, Tom chose to punish Lucius for his many failings by appointing his son to be the murderer of Albus Dumbledore. I, meanwhile, felt sorry for Draco and went out of my way to encourage him to escape his situation, which I only did because I had started to associate with Narcissa Malfoy, which I only did because my Aunt Muriel introduced me to Narcissa's sister, Andromeda, which she only did because I was ashamed of my Weasley heritage. Because I was an insecure little prat at thirteen, because Tom Riddle was jealous of Abraxas Malfoy, Draco Malfoy wound up with the Elder Wand *and* defected to join his worst enemy."

"What—what are you saying?"

Percy shrugs hopelessly. "We only got the Horcrux from Bellatrix Lestrange's vault because Andromeda was able to reunite with her sister," he continues to explain fruitlessly. "Tom was only able to power his return to a body because he leveraged a protection life ward I had cast for my father, who was guarding the prophecy. It's all so—tangled, Harry, so messy and tangled. The whole war was just caught up in all of our stupid insecurities and worries and coincidences. You *had* to pity Tom, because that's what makes you different from him."

Perhaps I had to love Tom, because that's what makes me different than him, Percy thinks, and then swallows hard.

“It’s like Snape said,” says Harry softly. “We barely won the war.”

“It’s impossible to separate anyone’s actions from anyone else’s actions,” Percy says, shaking his head. “Severus acted as a hero, but he was a great bloody git to everyone in Hogwarts, including me, and he was a terrible teacher. Tom was the most brilliant wizard I’ve ever met, but he was cruel and violent and incredibly vain. Dumbledore was friends with *Grindelwald*, who was kidnapped by Lucius, who was attempting to bargain with the Dark Lord to save his son.”

“So what you are saying is that everyone is more than one thing,” says Harry thoughtfully.

Percy wavers between nodding and shaking his head. He had been saying that, but he’d been saying a lot more than that, or a lot less. His mind feels jumbled and tired. “I’m saying that you shouldn’t feel bad if you’re confused,” he concludes tiredly. “Nobody was perfectly good, and nobody was perfectly evil. It’s like Dumbledore said to you, at the very end. All we are is the sum of our choices.”

“Well, you shouldn’t feel bad either,” Harry says obstinately. “So you—loved Tom. You still chose to destroy him, when it came down to it. How is that any different than what Dumbledore did to Grindelwald? They were friends, and he locked him in prison for the rest of his life.”

But if I can destroy what I love so easily, what does that say about me?

The words linger in Percy’s mouth, begging to be asked. But Percy looks at the Chosen One’s heavy face and then swallows the words unsaid. His torn soul is not Harry’s problem, nor is his guilt Harry’s to justify or condemn. Only Percy can assess the damage to his soul, and only Percy can decide if he is beyond redemption.

“Can you take me home?” Percy asks instead, hating himself for his weakness, but feeling utterly unable to return to the party. “Well, I suppose you won’t be able to get through Severus’ wards. To Grimmauld, if you think Andromeda would not be upset.”

“You’re staying with *Snape?”* Harry asks dubiously, but something in Percy’s face must have informed him that it was not the time for that conversation, for he visibly collects himself and nods. “I can take you to Grimmauld. You can—er, you’re able to—”

“I can Apparate, if you can Side-Along me.”

It is strange to be in Grimmauld, after so many days at Severus’ house. Percy bids goodbye to Harry, who returns to the party, and suffers through Kreacher’s loud exclamations. He is gratified, and perhaps saddened, to see that Regulus’ room is precisely how he left it. He really has to do something about Kreacher, he thinks to himself as he curls in Regulus’ bed, still in his fancy dress robes from the party, the medal pressing painfully against his chest.

He will need to think about what had occurred, about that strange conversation with Harry, and the surprise of the award, and the pain of his mother meeting his eyes from across the room.

But in the privacy of Regulus' room, what Percy does is mourn Tom, quietly, privately, sorrowfully. He stares at the clippings of a young Tom Riddle and mourns once more that young, brilliant boy, staring around him at Hogwarts with wide, impressed eyes, searching desperately for a place to establish himself. Had it taken months or years before Tom had crossed irrevocably onto the other side of humanity? If Percy had a Time Turner and could twist himself through rescue a young boy sitting without shoes in a cold graveyard, how many years back would he have to go before his presence would be sufficient motivation for Tom to defy the weighty expectations of his youth?

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Severus returns to an empty house, after Potter informs them all in muted tones that Percy had felt unwell and had been Apparated to Grimmauld Place. After that announcement, Severus finds it easy to make his excuses and disappear. He considers the idea of going to Grimmauld, but if Percy had wanted his company, he would have asked Harry to fetch him, rather than to spirit him away.

Severus pours himself a glass of wine as he sits in the downstairs parlour, still in his fancy robes. On the table between their chairs is the small book of fabric, which he picks up and leafs through with the other hand. On each page, Percy had carefully written the fabric colour, the place of purchase, and the suggested matching tones. Severus looks at the book for a very long time, wondering when Percy had put this together. Had he been seventeen, recently graduated from Hogwarts, determined to be correctly dressed if nothing else? Had it been later, under Lucius' tutelage, or Yaxley's, as Percy began to mingle with society's finest? Or had it been even earlier, when Percy had been thirteen or fourteen, facing a terrible burden with nothing more than his own wits to rely on?

When Severus goes upstairs for the evening, there are the slivered remains of a wine glass in the fireplace, shattered immediately upon impact, and the book of pocket squares has been carefully cleaned and returned to Percy's bedside table, for his perusal if he were ever to return to their home.

Sleep does not come easily, that night, for either of them, each in their respective lonely bedrooms, the moon shining brilliantly through the glazed windows, but sleep does come to both, eventually, and as the moon passes overhead toward dawn, some tension relaxes from their shoulders, and their hands do not curl around invisible wands, and the hazy sleep-memories of each other's words whisper into their dreams.

Chapter End Notes

I struggle to write Severus! I am trying to practice because if (IF) I write a small sequel to this story, it will move between Percy and Severus' perspectives as they engage on some to-be-determined adventure in an attempt to heal their damaged souls and build Percy's magical core. Please let me know if this would be something you would be interested in. I'll have some more notes once I finish this, but I'm trying to decide whether people would enjoy reading more of this Severus + Percy or whether I should let them rest and move on to something new.

(Although, the something new I am flirting with is a Percy-Sorted-into-Slytherin story, so. A little worried that it'll be too similar to this? Tom, Severus, purebloods galore? Let me know your thoughts!)

One left.

ENDINGS & BEGINNINGS (1/2)

Chapter Notes

I don't...I don't even know. I literally have been trying to end this story for like three chapters now. This is it, I promise. Once I post this (...and the part two of this, stay tuned, I will be posting it MINUTES LATER so I can't delay any longer), I am marking this story as COMPLETE.

Also, I'm definitely writing a sequel. I can't stop writing about these two. Send help.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: ENDINGS & BEGINNINGS (1/2)

1998— (Percy is 22 & 35, Severus is 37, and both are struggling to adjust to life after war)

September 1998

In the weeks after the gala, Percy reaches an uneasy sort of equilibrium with Severus, who does not mention the medal that Percy had won, nor his speech, nor his flight from the Ministry soon after. The four books stay quietly on the stool next to Percy's chair, but neither occupant of the small Muggle house brings up the idea of redemption—or of healing.

Surprisingly, of all of the difficult, weighty conversations that Percy has forced himself to have since returning at least nominally to the land of the living, the conversation with Harry is what sticks most persistently in his mind. It sometimes feels to Percy like he had been the only one truly *with* choices in the war, at least because he had been the only one with any sort of idea of what was to come. Harry, Severus, Draco, even Dumbledore—all were operating with narrow, specific perceptions of the world, where Percy alone could at least claim to see the bigger picture. Sometimes, Harry's voice will float, unbidden, through Percy's mind: *I didn't think war would be like this.*

But Percy had. Percy had known precisely what the war would be like.

In the first few days after the gala, this idea pains Percy, as it has many times before. Over the last decade, he had castigated himself a million and one times for the utter arrogance and idiocy he had displayed by twisting himself through time without the proper preparation, but barring that failing, in this timeline he should have known enough of what was coming to have moved to mitigate the war sooner. He'd seen such horrors play out in the Ministry once before; could he not have devised a more clever set of strategies to prevent them from occurring again? Could he not have spared Harry some pain, or obviated the need for Severus

to spy, or ended it all sooner than he had? Could he have secured a victory without…without Tom?

But oddly, as August slips into September and the new class of Hogwarts students begins their uneasy return to the castle, Percy starts to—well, not forgive himself, but remind himself of what he had told Harry. Even if Percy had known the entire story of the Elder Wand, would he have been able to knowingly orchestrate a situation to ensure that Harry wound up with it? Even with what Percy had known, it had taken a stunning combination of luck and bravery from all parties for Harry to arrive at Hogwarts wielding all three gifts of Death. Even if Percy had known that the Cup was in Bellatrix's Gringotts vault, would he have been able to better barter access to the vault, if Narcissa and Andromeda had not cause to trust him? Severus had said it multiple times: subterfuge was not one of Percy's strengths, nor was lying, nor was making friends, yet winning the war had required all three.

He had not made all of the correct decisions, but surely he had made some, hadn't he? Surely he had made some decisions based on his understanding of the past, though others based only on his confused understanding of the complex court of personal relationships, machinations, and motivations that presided over the war. Even if Percy could send himself back in time again, would he now have the arrogance to think he could do any better? He'd barely handled this war. Why would he think he could handle another?

Strangely, this idea comforts Percy in a way that few other justifications could. Percy cannot claim any particular skill or brilliance; for one, he'd barely been able to keep Tom at bay, and now without his magic those thirteen NEWTs mean next to nothing on his short list of accomplishments. His greatest sin, as far as he can tell, had been the arrogance to believe he could do anything meaningful at all. That the war even ended was nothing short of a miracle, and so much of the good in this timeline had occurred despite him, not because of him.

And Tom—Tom had not loved him. Tom had thought little of him, except as a means to the ends. Percy had forgotten that, during his re-emergence into society. Percy had thought of himself as somebody crucial, somebody important, someone meaningful enough that Tom had hesitated, at the very end, because he had thought Percy valuable enough to pursue over his own goals.

Arrogance, arrogance, arrogance. Tom would have never used Percy for anything other than his loyalty. Voldemort had chosen Percy to be his sworn companion, but he had chosen Severus once before, and perhaps even Abraxas, or Bellatrix, or one of his other more powerful followers. Tying Percy so visibly to Voldemort would have been a political act of genius; Harry Potter would have died, Voldemort would have emerged a benevolent leader, and Percy would have followed obediently at his heels. Enough of his peers would have trusted Percy—or trusted his judgement—enough to follow suit. Enough of his family may have listened to him, just long enough to realise that resistance would be futile. Percy could have linked the Dark Lord indelibly to the Light, or the Light purebloods, or the past followers of Harry Potter.

The offer to be sworn companion would have therefore been no different than Dumbledore asking Percy to spy on his brothers or contribute funding to the Order. Dumbledore had never been interested in Percy for Percy's own sake, and neither had Tom, nor Voldemort.

Severus…Severus had been interested in him, once, as had McGonagall, for the stolen brilliance he had displayed on the basis of his extra years of scholarship. But even Severus had tired of him, before he knew the truth. Even McGonagall had no need of him, now that his magic is gone forever.

An Animagus transformation and a Patronus does not a great wizard make, Mr. Weasley.

As October drips wetly around the corner of a staggeringly windy September, Percy finds to his surprise that he is reconciled to this idea. In a way, it is a relief to realise that he does not have anything to offer anyone anymore. He had been operating under the heavy constraints of pressure for so many years that to be abruptly free of all expectations is—incredibly freeing. Percy occasionally reads the Prophet, but the structural changes in the Ministry hardly affect him, and it is no longer his responsibility to ensure that Scrimgeour is adequately informed of each day's challenges. There is a controversy brewing over the proposition to allow students to retake their NEWTs, but Percy no longer has ties to Hogwarts and therefore does not need to have an opinion. Even when the Muggles that Percy now comfortably interacts with at the local grocery shop all buzz about some cessation of political conflict in the Muggle portions of Ireland, he merely has to adopt an concerned, interested expression without thinking through its implications.

He is like a ghost, floating through the world, touched by nothing, affecting nothing, and he finds a great burden lifted off his chest, like the weight of his physical afflictions is no longer relevant. Percy has been many things: a student, a time traveller, a wizard, a spy, a Death Eater, a Muggle. To be a ghost is something entirely new, but he relaxes into it, and at times he correctly identifies the feeling floating inside his ribcage as contentment.

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October 1998

Despite Percy's unexpected sources of peace, a few persistent worries remain. The first, of course, is Severus, who despite an Order of Merlin seems no more reconciled to his choices than before. As October begins its dreaded march toward Samhain—the anniversary of James and Lily's deaths, Percy realises only this year, as the Prophet plans a celebration that Harry will have to grudgingly attend—Severus prickles visibly, until Percy would not have been surprised to see a hard shell growing over his body.

The second is, predictably, Percy's parents. On Percy's desk, he has a letter from his parents, inviting him to the next Weasley dinner. There have been four such Weasley dinners that Percy had not RSVP'd to, nor attended, but the next will boast the Trio and Ginny, released from Hogwarts for the weekend so that Harry (and the rest of the Wizarding World) may properly mourn James and Lily, so if Percy were to choose one to attend, it ought to be this, at least for the assurance of having a few other Weasleys as buffers. (His mother, eyes hard and empty, his father, sitting silently, air leaking out of his open mouth).

The third is, unexpectedly, McGonagall. She writes to Percy after the first month-end of term and invites him to visit the castle. *Myrtle was quite excited to hear the news of the gala, with all of its surprises,* writes McGonagall in a delicate, curling script. Percy traces his finger over the emerald-green ink. He's never received a letter from McGonagall, and her handwriting is surprisingly more formal and elegant than it had been for the comments scrawled at the bottom of his papers. He wonders if she had used an enchanted quill. *She would like to see you; it sounds as if your last meeting ended in discord.*

Percy snorts. Discord indeed. He can imagine what Myrtle had said about him; the last Percy remembers, he had shouted at Myrtle until she'd fled in tears. He supposes he ought to see Myrtle, if only so that he can share the medal with her (concealed under the bed, still in its velvet box) and apologise for his actions. He cannot imagine she will continue to be interested in him, now that their shared mission is over and he cannot regularly return to Hogwarts, but he owes her at least a sense of closure, to tell her about Tom.

What worries Percy about McGonagall's letter, however, is the small paragraph at the end, which informs him that they have something serious to discuss. Percy does not like to think what would be serious enough to merit a letter from McGonagall, who must have her hands full chairing the school through such a chaotic year. From Ginny's, Draco's, and Cedric's letters, it sounds as if half of the students are rebelliously devoting their freedom to unruly pranks, and the other half are dreadfully behind in their lessons and clamouring for attention from the exhausted professors.

But Severus, when Percy mentions the letter casually to him over lunch, seems to already understand the situation. "You should speak to her," he says with a curious intensity. Percy frowns at him over his fork, but Severus does not meet his eyes. Severus has not met his eyes very much for the last month, ever since the gala, and Percy will have to ask why, one day, when he feels like risking the uneasy equilibrium they had managed in the interim. "Minerva intends well."

Percy continues frowning at Severus. The war may be over, but conversations with Severus always seem to engage that same part of Percy's brain that cannot help but rove over each word and pick it apart for multiple meanings. It is the same part of his brain that once delighted in Ancient Runes or Potions or Transfiguration, and as always, the little jump that his mind makes before it wakes up is mildly disorienting. "What does she intend?"

Severus takes a deliberate bite, so that his mouth is occupied with small, neat chews for the next few seconds. Percy does not let up, continuing to stare suspiciously at the other occupant of the house. If it is not trouble (and, despite it all, Percy trusts Severus to tell him, if there is trouble) then what in Merlin's name could McGonagall have to say to Percy?

Severus resists as long as he can, but the post-war version of Severus is far worse at weathering awkward silences than he'd been before, or perhaps Percy has improved the force of his gaze. Regardless, after a prolonged hesitation, Severus says reluctantly, "It appears that Tom's final stand attempted to pull on Hogwarts' magic, in addition to that of his followers. From what I understand, the wards have not…fully returned to their previous strength."

Percy frowns, strangely unsettled to hear this news so unexpectedly delivered over lunch. "You have—you have been working with her?"

Severus gives a shrug that is too casual to be genuine. "As the previous Headmaster," he says, his nose wrinkling involuntarily with discomfort, "I was thought to be capable of providing valuable insight."

"I see." Percy turns back to his food. He lasts precisely three chews before he swallows and says quietly, "I had not been…aware that you had gone to Hogwarts."

"I have not," responds Severus severely, and Percy flushes just slightly at the tips of his ears at how transparent he must have been to provoke such a deep, sonorous response. "We have merely corresponded via letter twice. In my last letter, I recommended she may enlist your services as well. Do *not* protest that you are a Muggle—" Severus says sharply as Percy begins to do just that. “As I have said to you before, unless you lost your brain in that confrontation with Tom along with your magic, you may be able to help determine either what harm Tom might have inflicted, or how to repair the wards.”

“How?” Percy asks belligerently. “I cannot sense magic as I once could, Severus.”

Severus pauses, a pugnaciously green leaf of rocket arugula hanging from the tines of his fork. Percy had been in charge of lunch, and he’d whisked together some pretentious mustard that his mother would have never authorised him to purchase— *dijon*, Severus had said, pursing his mouth around the pronunciation, which had for some inexplicable reason left Percy’s mouth dry—with freshly squeezed lemon juice, ground black pepper, and a splash of a delicate vinegar. Though simple, these types of fresh salads were to Severus’ preference, and so Percy always tried to incorporate them into the meal. “You have sensed my magic,” Severus says, as if Percy would lie to him. “I have seen you…react to me.”

Perhaps due to their constant proximity to each other, Percy has found that he has inculcated an—awareness of Severus, and the sharp bite of Severus’ magic is one of the few things to permeate the thick glass barrier that Percy now feels exists between him and the rest of the magical world. Yet at the same time, Percy has become very aware of *Severus*, and so at times he does not know whether he had truly noticed Severus’ magic, or just Severus himself. He is not sure it is not just wishful thinking on his part to think he can feel any magic at all. “I’m not so sure,” Percy says without explaining further. “When I do notice…magic, the magic feels muted. If Tom really did call on Hogwarts’ magic like he planned, it would require a far more delicate…awareness than mine.”

“Perhaps,” says Severus neutrally. “Perhaps not. At the very least, you could relate to Minerva what Tom planned to do.”

“I do not think I can return to Hogwarts,” Percy admits, though the admission stings less than it would have a few months ago.

Severus does not meet Percy’s eyes as he exhales, his nostrils flaring, and says, “I am feeling apprehensive myself. I visited Minerva once, but I believed…I believed it would be my last visit to Hogwarts. I would propose we coordinate our visits, if only so that I may aid with the detection spells, and you may aid with determining the results.” He pauses and then adds, “I believe if we go together it will make the ordeal easier to bear.”

When Severus says it like *that*, it would be churlish to refuse, Percy thinks to himself, churlishly. Though he has to admit, a few days later as he waits for Severus to once again dismantle the wards around his fireplace, part of him *is* excited to return to Hogwarts. There is a satisfaction in doing things that *hurt*, and Percy at times feels so transient and submerged in that thick glass barrier that walls him off from the rest of the world that to hurt is a relief. Hogwarts is the last place that Percy saw Tom; it was the last place that Percy felt his magic; and the Hogwarts in Percy's soul was the last view Percy had of his soul before he tore it in half with his own hands.

They are able to Floo directly into the Headmaster's office—Head*mistress*, Percy has to remind himself as he spins through the enchanted green flames—which at least is an easier transition, given that Percy can count on one hand the number of times he had been inside the office. He turns and gives Severus an evaluatory glance as the other man steps outside of the fireplace, but his face is implacable and calm, though of course this office must be full of worse memories for him than it is for Percy. Percy tries to think of when he'd last been here. When Fudge had tried to apprehend Dumbledore, he supposes, his lips quirking slightly at the memory.

"Thank you for arriving so promptly," McGonagall says, stepping out from behind the desk and moving to greet them. She seems to hesitate with him, and he hesitates back, unsure if he ought to give his old professor a hug, or shake her hand, or give a brisk update of his whereabouts for the past few months. He nods his head formally and she does the same, her pointed green hat straight and steady as usual. "Mr. Weasley. I was gladdened to see that you accepted the Order of the Minister. Your speech was notable as well."

"Thank you," replies Percy, politely. He takes the seat that she indicates, which unfortunately places him directly at the eye-line of Albus Dumbledore, who smiles at him warmly with his painted face. Percy feels the hint of a chill creep across his shoulders and raise the hairs on the back of his neck. The last time he had seen a portrait in this room, he had had a sudden image of Tom in its place, a sense that these portraits contained magic far older and more powerful than the portraits outside, a sudden flash of certitude that what he'd boldly dreamt of in the privacy of his bed hangings could be actuality.

"I am so proud of you," says Albus, his eyes flicking between Percy and Severus, who takes the other seat on the other side of the Headmistress' desk. " *Both* of you. Hogwarts should be proud to have two such fine graduates."

Percy does not need to look at Severus to know that his face must mirror Percy's own. McGonagall, luckily, manages to save them from the inevitable outcome of *that* conversation by clapping her hands briskly and redirecting their attention to a map spread out on the desk. Percy looks at the map and then does a double-take. He knows that map, its carefully inked outlines of each room in the castle, its dizzying array of footsteps as the castle's occupants move about. He made it.

"Yes," says McGonagall, who had been looking for his reaction. "The ghost Myrtle explained to me how to use it. It is a remarkable piece of magic from you both."

"The creators of the original deserve the most credit," mumbles Percy, not wanting to ruin the day by invoking James Potter or Sirius Black in what will already be a fraught moment. "I

merely copied it."

"To successfully create a secondary anchor off of its primary application would be quite complex," corrects McGonagall, laying her hand gingerly on the corner of the map. "I admit I am interested to know how you accomplished that without degrading the structural integrity of the original connection."

Percy makes an involuntary grimace as he considers it. "I don't know," he admits, apologetically, hating as always to arrive at McGonagall's office without an adequate answer. "I just…used a series of linking charms, powered by runes inked into the parchment, to link *this* to *that*." He nods at the Headmaster's desk, where the registry is presumably concealed, and then admits in a smaller voice, "I did not consider the structural integrity of the original connection at all."

"Really?" McGonagall prods at the map with her wand and it unfolds itself, hovering in the space between. With another spell, it lights up, each footstep representing a distinct being pulsing with a faint orange glow. "It is almost organic, the way that the map is able to pinpoint so accurately the location of each person. Fascinating magic."

Percy is on the map, he notices. He tries not to read too much into it. "I made an anchor off of this as well," he admits, and both Severus and McGonagall glance at him in surprise. "I took a map of London, and I used this to force it to show me Tom's whereabouts as he moved about his life. His history, if you will. It wasn't…tremendously useful, since I could not figure out how to correlate the movements to specific years nor slow the flow of information so that I may consider it in detail, but it is how I found the location of the orphanage where he lived before Hogwarts."

McGonagall's look of impressed approval at first warms Percy before he feels like the bottom of his stomach has abruptly dropped away. It matters not if he was once some sort of—prodigy, or skilled practitioner of magic. He is nothing of the sort now, and so those magical accomplishments of his in the past are little more than accolades to write in his memoirs, something that happened to a past version of him that no longer existed, as irrelevant as his acts in the first timeline.

(Are—the acts that he performed in the first timeline irrelevant? Percy is struck by this idea, and he struggles to control his facial expression as it lingers persistently in his mind. Would that be a relief, to know that he has moved beyond those actions, or would it be a loss to lose an awareness and understanding of where he had once been?)

"I have always thought we ought to teach our students less about magic," Severus says conversationally to McGonagall, who allows the map to float gently back to the desk between them. "I find that some students perform far better without an understanding of their constraints and produce results such as this. The other students do not possess the necessary brainpower to understand what rules we may have omitted, and it saves us an appreciable amount of time."

McGonagall chuckles, and even Dumbledore behind her smiles at Severus' sardonic comment. It provides Percy an extra few seconds to get his erratic breathing under control

and look up, carefully neutral, as McGonagall uses the map to illustrate the boundaries of the wards and where they have been flickering, of late.

“They do not entirely go out,” she explains, her finger hovering at a copse of trees at the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest, relatively close to where Quirrel-and-Voldemort had once fed on a baby unicorn. Percy remembers the moment for a vivid prolonged heartbeat and then shakes the memory away, trying to focus on what McGonagall is saying. “Their strength waxes and wanes, with no discernible pattern. I have tracked the time of day, my estimate as to the degree of difference in strength, and the location of the fluctuation and cross-referenced it against class schedules, solar and lunar phases—even Harry’s movements, in case he may be influencing the wards.”

Severus takes the chart of observations that McGonagall had recorded and begins to peruse it carefully. Percy continues to look at the map, his mind roving over the indicated boundaries of the wards and the points of weakness. “Tom said that he wanted to draw upon the magic of Hogwarts,” he explains, forcing his mouth past the inevitable stutter over *Tom*, and keeping his eyes on the map so that he does not have to look at Dumbledore. “He wanted to draw on Hogwarts itself as an anchor.”

“Ludicrous,” scoffs McGonagall, but Percy shakes his head. What he thinks of, suddenly, are dragons, wheeling and whirling over the sky, following invisible lines that humans could not hope to see.

“He maintained that the Founders chose to build Hogwarts *here* because of the physical properties of the land,” Percy explains, extrapolating slightly from what Tom had insinuated in that last conversation. He pauses, waiting for a pang in his stomach, but his body is silent, even when the image of Tom swims into his mind, eyes bright behind a plate of toast. “He thought that the students themselves continued to imbue the air with magic, and that would provide him an opportunity.”

“The land of Hogwarts is not *magical* inherently,” objects McGongall, “though I suppose that the students do produce magic, which would…linger in the area.”

Percy hesitates and then shakes his head. “Maybe not magical in the way that we are used to,” he explains uncomfortably, shooting a look at Severus, who interprets it correctly and comes to his aid.

“We have reason to believe there are multiple types of magic,” Severus explains authoritatively, so that Percy does not have to. “We spoke to a Dementor—I will explain more later, Minerva—who mentioned to us that there is a type of physical magic that underpins all creatures and can at times seem to be imbued *within* the land. We have encountered this magic in a series of caves where Tom hid one of his Horcruxes, and Nicholas Flamel confirmed that he believes the Philosopher’s Stone utilises those properties.”

“You visited the caves?” Dumbledore asks over McGonagall’s immediate series of questions. Percy watches alertly as Dumbledore’s eyes flick first to Percy and then linger on Severus, who carefully looks away with a practised slide of his eyes.

“It was Percy who found them,” says Severus savagely, with the clear intent to wound. “And Percy who drank the potion."

Percy swallows, his mouth dry, as Dumbledore stares at him in surprise, the force of his eyes nearly tangible despite the painted form. It reminds him of Tom, suddenly, more than anything else had, and he feels now the queasy squeeze in his stomach that he’d expected earlier.

“You drank it, didn’t you?” Severus continues, his voice low and intent. “You drank it the night that you died.”

“My dear boy—”

“You went to your death on the brink of despair,” says Severus with a hoarse, pained laugh. Percy feels his cheeks flush at the sound and he glances up at McGonagall, who is strangely silent, staring at Severus with a surprisingly sorrowful expression written across her aged, lined face. “What did you see, Albus? What memories did you take with you to the next world?”

“I am sorry, Severus,” says Dumbledore, and Severus flinches as if a charm of lightning travelled through his lanky, bended frame. “I am sorry that I asked you to end my life. I am sorry I did not tell you of the Horcruxes. I am sorry I did not bring you with me to the caves.”

Severus is so tense, the muscles in his jaw bulging boulders on his face, that Percy watches him anxiously, expecting him to snap and dissolve into a pile of crumbled bones. “Nearly a year I was in this office,” he says viciously, “after over a decade of service to you, and you could not trust me with your fears?”

“I could not risk that Tom would know what we suspected—”

“We brought *Him* one of his Horcruxes,” hisses Severus, jerking his head savagely to Percy, who jumps in response. “We brought *Him* a Horcrux as a token of good faith, and that same Horcrux told us where the others were. I concealed far more from the Dark Lord, Albus, than knowledge of the Horcruxes. You did not trust *me*. Perhaps you thought I would be tempted; perhaps you thought my hatred of the boy would prevent me from acting rationally—”

“You concealed your partnership with *him* from me,” interrupts Dumbledore, and as Tom once had, he seems to grow in his frame until Percy half-expects him to step out and strike Severus across the face. That Percy is *him* goes unsaid; Percy remains silent, as does McGonagall, both sensing that this moment ought to remain between Severus and Dumbledore, who have much still to say to each other. Though Percy has never liked Dumbledore, he is self-aware enough to know that his feelings are inextricably tied to his sense of battered pride, his insecurities, his anxiety that in the first timeline neither he nor Dumbledore had managed to protect his family. What Severus feels for Dumbledore is clearly oceans away from what Percy feels, and it reminds Percy oddly of the moment where Severus had seen Lily emerge from the diadem, and Percy had been struck by the wish that he would never understand such sorrow. “You were acting outside of my purview long before the issue of the Horcruxes even became relevant, my boy. I suspected you had the diary long before you gave it to me for perusal.”

“I was not your servant, Albus, unless you were more similar to the Dark Lord than you liked to believe,” Severus responds witheringly. “I investigated the diary thoroughly and thought it to be inert before I brought it to you. I did not purposefully conceal its existence from you but wished to examine an article of my House before I relinquished it, knowing I would never see it again. You have never trusted me, Albus, beyond what I may do for you as a weapon.”

Percy had always thought that Severus had agreed to keep their partnership private to protect *him,* or because he had not believed Dumbledore would allow them to proceed on their path without meddling irrevocably with the timeline. Percy had never known that Severus had felt so strongly about the diary and its threat to Slytherin House, or about Dumbledore, or had entertained his own private thoughts of insecurity about Dumbledore’s esteem for him. If Percy had known, he would have told Severus that Dumbledore requesting that he murder him was the highest degree of trust that anyone could bestow on another.

“I think we have rather digressed,” McGonagall interjects tartly. Percy catches himself exhaling in relief. He does not think Severus *hates* Dumbledore, any more than he hates the Dark Lord, but it seems clear to everyone in the room that this ought to be a longer conversation, and perhaps one conducted in private. Percy can feel the tension rippling off of Severus’ body, a heady rush of heat that sparks uncomfortably on Percy’s skin. “I would like us to return to the issue of the wards. Can either of you sense this type of physical magic, or know more about what Tom intended?”

Percy glances at Severus, but the other man has shut his eyes, his nostrils flaring, as he breathes deeply in a visible attempt to rein in his anger. That he is so rattled to display his emotions so openly is never a good sign, so Percy clears his throat and says, “During the Final Duel, Tom began to pull on the magic of all of the Death Eaters in an attempt to… augment his own power. I am not sure precisely what he intended to do. It was after Harry survived the Dark Lord’s attempt to kill him directly, and Tom was very…frightened of him.”

As he says the words, he realises for the first time that Tom *had* been frightened, that his fear had provided that extra edge to his voice and shine to his eyes that Percy had not been able to identify. He had been frightened to see Harry survive a Killing Curse, and he had been frightened, in Percy’s soul, to hear what Percy had to say. Perhaps he was even frightened to contemplate what Percy’s offer may mean. Percy’s mouth goes dry and he falls silent, sagging back in his chair, as this realisation wedges itself solidly in his throat. Tom had been frightened of Harry, yes, but he had also been frightened of *him.*

“So you think he may have begun to pull on Hogwarts’ magic as well,” muses McGonagall thoughtfully, luckily not pressing Percy further, who has temporarily lost the power of speech. “When he was defeated, I would expect that magic to be released, and we *have* recorded a surge of magic at approximately that time.”

Percy shudders to think of it, to think of what must have occurred. His own soul would have split, the surge of his magic sufficient to defeat Tom. His own actions would have been like a small stone dropped into a meandering stream, hardly enough to cause an impact, but Tom’s death would have been like a boulder falling from a cliff to the crashing waves below.

“But it is curious that the magic did not re-enter Hogwarts,” McGonagall continues. What goes unsaid is that the other Death Eaters retained their magic, or at least had not come

forward publicly to claim otherwise.

Severus, back in control of himself, speaks again, though his voice is lacking some of its customary velvet. “Perhaps it did, Minerva, but it did not enter the wards itself.”

“What are you suggesting?” says the portrait of Dumbledore.

Severus’ fingers twitch against themselves, gleaming and white against his dark robes, but he does not otherwise react. “Merely that we may be better off reconstructing the wards, rather than expecting them to self-heal.”

Percy does not fully listen to the following conversation, which climbs swiftly into heights of the theory of the Hogwarts warding that he has no hope of reaching with a Muggle ladder rather than a Levitation charm, but he allows his old professors’ voices to wash over him as he stares at his hand and tries to move past the thought that perhaps he *had* frightened Tom, that perhaps Tom had not known what to say.

Why should it matter to him? Percy had known in the very depths of his soul that his offer would not have been sufficient for Tom. Harry had given Voldemort the chance to repent, and Voldemort had been no more willing than Tom to admit there was any need for it at all. *I have no need for love*, Tom had said, and when Percy had pushed the question further he had seen the fear and sadness and stubborn anger in Tom’s eyes. He had seen Tom’s soul himself, seen it irrevocably torn, seen it damaged beyond all recognition.

But it does matter to him. It matters to him that perhaps Tom had felt as unsure about Percy as Percy had felt about Tom. Perhaps Percy’s actions had been as unpredictable to Tom as Tom’s had been to Percy. Perhaps Tom had not known what to make of him, a Gryffindor pureblood conspiring to defeat one Dark Lord, only to shelter and nourish that same Dark Lord’s soul. Tom had never understood why Percy had cared for his family despite his anger, why Percy had not disavowed his House after that first initial deception, and perhaps even why Percy had always told the truth where Tom had always expected lies. Tom had never fully understood Percy, as Percy had never fully understood Tom, and both had navigated their relationship by guessing at each other’s motives.

Perhaps Tom had tried, in his own way, to indicate his favour for Percy. He had left him gifts, and he had taught him magic, and he had protected Percy when he could. He had trusted Percy more than he had trusted anyone—perhaps more than even Abraxas, who had never, Percy had suspected, learned of Tom’s inauspicious beginnings—and he had been jealous when he’d thought Percy had preferred the Dark Lord’s company. Percy had never known what power exactly the diadem gave Tom, whether Tom could see his soul or sense if he was telling the truth or whether it gave him nothing other than the power to take a form—but Tom had been created from his own wand and a Founder’s Artefact and Percy’s magic and he had *trusted* Percy, and at the very last minute, he had hesitated.

And suddenly, staring over the desk at the portrait of Dumbledore, who was shifting around in his frame as he contributed to the discussion—three generations of Hogwarts Headmasters in one room and many more lining the walls—Percy thinks that he understands Dumbledore, or at least what Dumbledore had told Harry. All of Percy’s actions had been leading toward that one moment of hesitation, that one glimpse into Tom’s human mind, and that moment of

hesitation had been enough for Percy to defeat Tom. It had been enough for Percy to understand that he *had* to defeat Tom, that Tom was more dangerous because he was human, that because he was ruled by his fears and desires and insecurities and hatreds that he would not hesitate to burn their world to the ground. It was precisely because Tom could be saved that his choice to deny that path was so dangerous.

Perhaps Dumbledore had seen that in a younger Tom, far before anyone else. Perhaps he had thought it worth it to sacrifice one boy for the sake of wizardkind, just as Percy had been willing to sacrifice Harry, had for an entire year forced himself to be reconciled to the idea of sacrificing Cedric. Perhaps Tom could have been saved, and Dumbledore tried in his own way, but the effort had not been good enough, just as Percy's efforts had not been good enough either.

And perhaps Dumbledore had acted harshly with Tom because of his history with Grindelwald. Percy thinks of what he had learned from Rita Skeeter's book, that Dumbledore had been friends with Grindelwald, conspired with him, learned magic with him, only to defeat him when his power grew too much. Percy tries to imagine meeting someone that reminded him of Tom. Would he be harsher or more lenient with him as a result?

More lenient, Percy thinks to himself. He cannot forget that small boy in a graveyard, standing in the snow without shoes, staring down at his mother's grave. He cannot forget the sixteen year old boy in that old photograph, smirking at the camera, his eyes cool and distant. He cannot forget the Tom he knew, brushing his lips against his, pacing in his portrait, spitting out his anger at Dumbledore even decades later. But perhaps that was where he and Dumbledore differed. Perhaps Dumbledore used up his leniency on keeping Grindelwald alive, and he came down more harshly on Tom as a result. Or perhaps Dumbledore had loved a Dark Lord in his own way and learned the lesson that leniency was never to be rewarded. Percy supposes he will never know which approach is better, and he supposes it does not matter, as Percy will never encounter a Dark Lord again.

"Mr. Weasley?" McGonagall asks, looking at him with concern, and Percy realises with a jump that he has been staring at Dumbledore's portrait for many minutes without speaking. "Are you feeling ill?"

"Do you think it was the right thing to do, to expect the worst of Tom?" Percy asks Dumbledore, who smiles ruefully at him, as if he had been expecting the question since the moment that Percy walked into the room. Severus makes a noise, deep in his throat, and Percy remembers what Severus had said to bolster Percy before he'd walked into this offer and asked to join the Order. *Albus always believes the worst of people, though he claims he believes the best.*

"My dear boy," begins Dumbledore, but then he falters, his eyes roving over Percy's face, which he supposes must look terrible. A second later, Dumbledore's voice changes, to be more flat, but in a way, strangely more honest. "I did not realise that is what I was doing for many years," he admits heavily, and his eyes flick to Severus. "I told myself that I was preventing myself from making the same mistake twice. Yet I fear all I did was make an entirely new mistake."

“That’s why you were so nice to Harry,” completes Percy. “You did not want to go down the same path again.”

“And yet I did,” admits the portrait, still in that heavy flat tone. “I fear my love for Harry hurt him as indelibly as my fear of Tom.”

Percy nods, slowly. His heart feels very tired, all of a sudden, very full and heavy in his chest, as if pressing against his breastbone with each sluggish, weighty thud. “If you could go back in time,” he says, and he notices McGonagall’s attention snap to him as tightly as Severus’, “what would you change, if you could?”

Dumbledore smiles without humour, and though the artist who painted him must have rendered him at his strongest, he seems to look very old to Percy. “I would not travel through time at all,” he says simply. “Not because I am content with how my life occurred, but because I would not trust myself not to destroy everything I loved in an attempt to prevent everything I feared.”

Percy cannot go back in time again, not now, not ever. His body would not sustain it, even if he still had his magic. But could he imagine travelling back in time, far enough to try and save Tom from the fate that eventually befell him? Could he live with himself if his efforts made things worse, if he damned Tom to an even worse fate, or even if he merely tried his best, to no avail? Percy thinks to himself dryly that perhaps it was good that he did not know all of the messy tangle that awaited him in the war. If he knew now everything that occurred, everything he could have prevented, everything that he would try to maintain—he would have gone mad, even more so than he did already. And for all that Tom descended into an awful, evil path, the only thing worse than being unable to rescue him in this lifetime would be to be unable to rescue him in another lifetime, to always wish he could have done it again and again, better each time, to feel like he had always failed Tom, and never been enough.

“I understand,” says Percy, and he is speaking of many more things than the concept of time travel, and Dumbledore holds his gaze and nods, as if he could hear all of the realisations that have crept quietly into Percy’s mind since the Final Duel.

“I am glad, dear boy,” says Dumbledore quietly, and for the first time in Percy’s life, the term of endearment does not rankle something unpleasant in his stomach. He nods at Dumbledore, knowing that they will likely not speak again, for the time in their lives when they intersected briefly has long been past, and they do not need anything more from each other.

Percy looks up at McGonagall, whose expression is complex, but far too complicated for Percy to begin to decipher. “May I be excused?” He asks politely, as if he were still a student in her class. “I’d like to see Myrtle, and I do not think I will be any more help here.”

McGonagall holds his gaze for a long second, just long enough for Percy to lose some of the calm he’d managed to obtain in the past few minutes, before she nods. “I will send someone to fetch you if we need your expertise.”

Percy appreciates the kindness in calling it *expertise*, so he manages to smile, albeit tightly, as he politely excuses himself from the room. At the bottom of the stairs, he begins to automatically reach for the bubble of magic that resides in the back of his neck that he uses to

power his self-Transfiguration before he pauses. Of course he cannot change his appearance, not anymore. He will have to walk through Hogwarts without the aid of a disguise, or a concealment charm, and it is quite a far distance to Myrtle's bathroom. He hesitates, the large stone gargoyle regarded him from under half-closed eyes. He knows of three or four small alcoves or abandoned classrooms within a five minute walk of the Headmaster's—*Headmistress'*—Office; he could easily hide inside one until it is time to return home.

Taking a deep breath, Percy reaches into his pocket, where the medal nestles next to the Dementor's stone. Both give him strength, and he straightens his back, adjusting his glasses until they sit evenly on his nose, and combing his fingers to tame some of his wayward curls. He is a Hogwarts graduate and an Order of the Ministry recipient; he will not be cowed, not by a simple walk through his Hogwarts. Perhaps his *last* walk through Hogwarts.

The Founders must be with him, or perhaps Hogwarts itself senses his deep dread, for he manages to make it to the second floor without running into anyone who has cause to give him anything other than a cursory glance. For all that Percy feels more comfortable around his youngest siblings after the Ministry dinner, and certainly Draco is an ally if not a friend, Percy cannot stomach the idea of seeing anyone else, and so he is relieved to arrive at the bathroom without incident.

Outside, he sees the drawing he had done once of Myrtle, swooping playfully around the pipes. He stares at it for a long time. What he notices is not the childishness of the rendering, as he typically could not help but mentally cringe at: the emphasis on the hair, where he had pressed his charcoal too deeply into the paper in an attempt to convey the glistening strands of Myrtle's plaits, or the timid attempt at shading refracted light into the flow of water that drips from one of the pipes in the corner. No, what stands out to him now is the confidence in each stroke, the assuredness he had felt, drawing his closest friend and hanging it up for all to see. Even then he had possessed more surety than he does now, though of course that version of Percy was at the beginning of the long and arduous duty. That version of Percy was drawing for fun, and to relieve stress, and to appease McGonagall, and the idea of painting Tom was nothing more than a quiet stirring in the back of his head as he drifted off to sleep. Percy cannot imagine drawing anything at all, though he of course would never be able to animate anything he produced.

"So you're back," says Myrtle, and Percy flinches violently, having become absorbed into his thoughts. He spins, his wrist instinctively flicking to produce his wand, which of course remains silent and inert in his bedside dresser at home. *Stop it*, he scolds himself. He had managed to subdue most of his automatic moves toward magic, but being in Hogwarts seems to have rendered all of that painful, painstaking work for naught.

"I'm back, at least for the day," agrees Percy, drinking in the sight of Myrtle. She at least has not changed, at least visibly, though as she hovers there and stares at him with an unforgiving expression, he concludes as he has many times before that perhaps she *has* changed, though her appearance remains constant. "Myrtle, can we speak?"

Myrtle raises a gleaming eyebrow. Percy wishes almost that her lips were wobbling or the water was beginning to swell. He has never known how to interact with someone who is

disappointed in him, and Myrtle is even harder to face for all that Percy owes her. “Do you have quite a lot to say?”

“I have an infinite number of things to say,” Percy says with a self-conscious laugh. “I know the first one must be an apology. I’ve been terribly rude to you, Myrtle. I’m sorry that I did not figure out a way to write to you during the war, and that I dismissed you when you were trying to help me after I…lost my magic, and that I haven’t been able to bring myself to see you since I last snapped at you.”

Myrtle does not say anything, though her form seems to soften just marginally, the edges blurring into the late afternoon sunset that struggles through the high, cathedral-like windows. This is the last place Percy spoke also to Tom, and as he looks around him, he half-expects to see bleeding words dripping on the walls.

“A lot has happened,” he continues, his eyes still on the walls where his sister and then he had painted bloody words into being with their bare hands. “I’ve been a mess, and in truth I’ve been longing to talk to you, Myrtle. I just couldn’t…I couldn’t face coming back to Hogwarts, and I suppose I couldn’t face you.”

“Why not?”

Percy coughs out a laugh, forcing himself to return his eyes to her figure. “Because I’ve done many things I’m not proud of, since we last spoke here,” he says, trying to remember when that had been. When he had come to check on Draco, perhaps, nearly two years ago. “And you’re my best friend, Myrtle, though I’ve not been anything close to a friend to you.”

Myrtle shifts, sending a cool breeze rippling through the air. “One might think that would mean you *would* want to talk to me.”

“But you see me so clearly,” explains Percy, a small, resigned smile curving his lips despite himself. “I’ve been living with Severus, you know. It’s been…well, it’s been good, better than I would have expected. He forces me to wake up at a normal time and eat three meals a day and go shopping for groceries and read books, and he’s been—kind, if you can believe it. But he has not forced me to speak of anything I do not wish to speak of, and you’ve never allowed me to avoid looking at things with open eyes.”

“You have always needed someone to help you untangle your mind,” says Myrtle, dryly but not cruelly, and she hesitates before diving through the bathroom door, which Percy takes as an invitation to enter. Inside, the sight of the Sink stops him short, and he feels his stomach begin to rebel, but he forces himself to take a deep breath, turning to face the windows on the opposite wall instead. When he looks up, Myrtle, hovering outside one of the stalls, is giving him a sad, understanding look. “It got worse with Tom, didn’t it?”

Though Myrtle is still upset at him, and Percy knows it will take more than a single apology to loosen some of the rigidity in her ghostly shoulders, even hearing those words and the understanding that they imply make his nose and throat burn fiercely as the urge to cry nearly overtakes him. As he had said to Myrtle, Severus had been very kind to him, perhaps more kind than he deserved, and had watched over him and prevented him from coming to harm, but speaking to him about fraught issues always feels like a duel, leaving Percy exhausted

even when the conversation was helpful. But Myrtle is his oldest friend, the friend who had helped him battle Tom for the longest, and she understands him in a way that Severus cannot until Percy allows himself to speak to him more plainly, which in his present state Percy is not sure he can even fathom.

It takes him nearly an hour, perhaps even two, to explain everything to Myrtle: how Tom had come back to a body with his assistance, how Tom had threatened his father, how he'd had to burn the twins' joke shop down and act in the most despicable way at work, how he and Tom had begun to lean on each other—perhaps even trust each other—as the days passed with each as each other's confidant. He tells Myrtle of the Dark Lord's offer to make him his sworn companion, and he admits in a small voice that he had been honoured to hear it, despite it all. And the Horcruxes, of course: he stutters his way through explaining that the diary had still been active, and that Harry Potter himself was a Horcrux, and the Deathly Hallows, and Draco's defection, and how he had all but damned Lucius to death as a result.

Myrtle listens quietly, though she interrupts occasionally to ask him clarifying questions, or to explain how something Percy says corresponds to some of her own experience. And when he needs to take a gulping, solidifying breath after the first torrent of words dries up, she gives him the kindness of time to collect himself, explaining in turn how she spent the year aiding the D.A., rallying the ghosts to protect the students against the Carrows, sowing chaos and misleading the professors and acting as a go-between when Severus could not openly communicate to Ginny or Cedric.

But Myrtle, being Myrtle, only gives him a limited amount of time before she dives into the main point. "There's more, isn't there? You said that things got worse with Tom, but you haven't said anything that's any different than before."

Percy rubs at the bridge of his nose. At some point during his monologue, he'd given up on standing and slid to the floor, his robes crinkling underneath him as he leaned against the stall door. He hoped that Filch, or whoever the caretaker is, had cleaned the floors recently, but at the time he had been too tired to care that his robes may get soiled. Percy formulates several different ways to say what is on his mind before eventually just admitting, "I began to care for him, Myrtle."

"You cared for him even as a diary," she points out.

Percy smiles bitterly. "I began to care for him even more. I don't fully understand how it happened, except that I suppose I spoke to him every day, and I began to learn more about what he was like as a *person*, not just as, I dunno, the incarnate of evil, and I started to feel bad for him. I think that's where it started."

"And I'm sure he encouraged it," Myrtle says archly. "I'm sure he made you feel rather special in return, and made you feel that he trusted you, or made you feel he was interested in you."

"I know he did all those things," Percy exclaims, "I know he was manipulating me. But I think that part of him cared for me too, Myrtle. I don't care how it sounds, or whether I am pathetic for thinking of that. I had his soul in *mine*, and I…felt it. I recognised it. I could call for him, and he for me, had he learned how. I don't know how to explain it better than that."

So of course he has to explain the Dementor, and the stone, and he even takes it out for her perusal. He can tell that Myrtle is not sure what to make of the news that he walked through his own soul, or that he sheltered Tom in his, but he can see the moment where she decides to accept him at his word, which makes him feel pathetically grateful. “That was always the problem for you, with Tom,” says Myrtle softly. “That he *was* human. That you were similar, in a way. It was what made you capable of winning his trust.”

Percy shrugs helplessly, his shoulder banging painfully against the stall door behind him. “I think we were both using each other, both manipulating each other, and then part of the feeling became real. At the very end, I just felt…sad for him, I think. I felt as if it had all been pointless, his attempt to achieve immortality or absolute power. I suppose if he hadn't done that, he would be an old man, and I would not be his friend, so what I was hoping for would have been impossible either way…"

He trails off, the words tangling over his tongue. Tom and he would have never intersected at this junction of their shared repeated youth if not for Tom's decision to create a Horcrux, a decision that launched Percy through time and into Tom's second life. So perhaps what Percy really wanted was not that Tom would have saved himself early on, but that he would have turned away from his path after he'd met Percy, which means that Percy would have been prepared to love someone who murdered his best friend. But again, Percy would have not met Myrtle if not for Tom.

"You can't go back in time again, so don't even bother," says Myrtle, who always has the uncanny ability to discern what he is thinking. "Percy, we did it. We destroyed all of the Horcruxes; we protected the Hogwarts students; we defeated Tom. I'm sorry that you lost your magic; trust me, I understand what it feels like to wake up and lose part of what made you *you.* But you need to let go of Tom."

"How can I?" Percy asks in a tiny voice, and Myrtle looks at him and then floats higher in the air, so that he gets to his feet instinctively to maintain eye contact.

"I want to show you something."

They walk through the halls, ghost next to boy, and this time many more people glance at them, though the majority are more interested in Myrtle. Percy is warmed and distracted from his own misery by how many people say hello to Myrtle by name, greet her openly or update her on some gossip. *Myrtle was made better by the war, too,* he thinks to himself, a guilty thought, since of course he ought to wish the war never happened at all.

"You're quite popular," he comments as they make it off the staircase to the seventh floor.

Myrtle gives him a playful pirouette in front of the portrait of the seventh floor. "I was a spy, too," she says with a conspiratorial grin. "Alecto Carrow used to frequent my bathroom as a girl, you know. Bellatrix made her life a living hell; always teasing her for being plump and insinuating that she was up to no good with her brother. Bellatrix even sent her a Valentine's one year that exploded into stinksap."

Percy winces at the thought. "I had no idea."

"So she was all too happy to complain to pathetic old Myrtle," Myrtle says cheerfully as they draw in front of the door to the Room of Hidden Things. "And who would believe that poor sad Myrtle would ever betray someone?"

"Me," replies Percy dryly, more to avoid the sight of the blank stretch of wall than anything else. "I've known you for far too long to be surprised by anything you do."

"I managed not to fall in love with her, though," Myrtle says with a mischievous sideways look. Percy expects for a second to be offended, but eventually he has to laugh, shaking his head.

"Severus was a spy for the Dark Lord and Dumbledore and managed the same, so I think the problem was just with me. What are we doing here, Myrtle?"

"Walk back and forth and think, *I am looking for the Resistance*," Myrtle instructs, and Percy obeys. As the door appears, she adds, "Anything's possible, if you've got enough nerve."

Percy frowns on her, but understanding replaces puzzlement as the door accepts the password and swings open. Looking at Myrtle for support, Percy gingerly walks inside.

"Ginny came up with that," Myrtle says from behind him as Percy stops in his tracks, awed. There are dozens of beds hanging from the ceiling, and a large central desk with chairs gathered around it, facing a series of blackboards. Next to the boards are bookshelves crammed with papers, and a large map of Hogwarts takes up the rest of the wall. On the other side of the room there are desks laid out in a jumble.

"What is this place?"

"The heart of the Resistance," Myrtle says proudly. "Sleeping over *there*; behind the bunks is a passageway to the kitchen. Mimsy was a huge help, Perce, she figured out a way for us to order the house elves to bring food without conflicting with the Carrows' orders. *Here* there are desks for classes and such; Cedric ran some lessons to ensure everyone made a token effort to keep up. In the middle is the strategy area. Your sister is scary, did you know that?"

"I always suspected, but I didn't know," says Percy absently, walking to the strategy area and trailing his finger over the desk. "Why did you bring me here, Myrtle? To show me that other people fought in the war? To remind me how awful Tom was? Trust me—I know all of those things."

"No," says Myrtle, and just barely through her translucent form, Percy can make out the lines of Hogwarts on the map behind her. "Percy, you and Tom destroyed this room. But the Resistance was able to use this room to shelter so many of them."

"So I almost took out a key resource in the war?"

"Things can get better," says Myrtle strongly, and Percy snaps his gaze up to see her. "Even a room like this can rise from the ashes of failure, if you want to get poetic about it."

Percy sighs, avoiding Myrtle's eyes as he walks over to one of the desks and seats himself in it. On the corner of the desk, someone had scratched DT + SF, and he traces his fingers idly over the grooves. "I don't know what to do with myself now," he admits softly. "Tom is part of it, but he's just one part of it. My magic…"

"I bet you never carved your name into a desk," Myrtle says, floating to his side and examining the carving. "I bet you've never been on a date—in this life, at least."

"Is this supposed to help me?"

"Percy, I'm *dead*." At this strange edge in Myrtle's voice, Percy looks up, shocked, to see Myrtle looking very much as though she were carved from silver. "And I can experience new things, to some extent, and thanks to you I've learned to exert myself physically on the world too. I helped to destroy a Dark Lord. I spied on the Death Eaters for the Resistance. But—" she adds firmly as Percy begins to shift impatiently, "I never went on a date, either. I never even kissed a boy. I'll never be anything more than what I am now. I'll never be able to travel out of Britain, or try foreign food, or go to the theatre. You understand that, don't you? There's a whole world out there that I can't see because I am *dead.* There were a million directions that my life could have taken me, and Tom removed all of those alternate timelines in an instant. I can only respond to events that happen around me, Percy. I can't create anything new."

"That's not true," Percy protests automatically. "Those can't both be true at the same time. Perhaps you can't leave Hogwarts—but you can't say that you're just floating around passively, Myrtle. You forget that I've seen you change too."

"But there is a part of me that I gave up, when my life ended," Myrtle says softly. "And though you think otherwise, it's more than you gave up to kill Tom. I can't fall in love, but you can, Percy. You can drink wine in France or ride on a Muggle aeroplane. You can visit your parents. I never saw my parents after they came to Hogwarts to collect my body, and they were proper Muggles, so I couldn't even say goodbye to them. I called for them and they couldn’t hear me, Percy. Your parents can still hear you."

Percy frowns down at the table, wondering who carved their name, who had fallen in love in the middle of a war.

"I once asked you to let me die, and I don't want that anymore, because you're right, Percy; I still exist, and that means something, even though I'm dead. But now I'm asking you to *live*, for me, or for Tom, or for Severus, or for your parents, or for yourself, ideally. Don't waste this, Percy. You *survived*. That should mean something."

Percy leaves Myrtle with the medal, which she requests he affix to the wall next to her portrait, feeling infinitesimally lighter yet notably more conflicted. As he walks aimlessly around the Hogwarts grounds, waiting for Severus to fetch him, he does not think of Tom, or even of Fred or George, or Ginny or Cedric, or even Penny.

He thinks first of Henry, of his insistence that all Gryffindors attend their House matches, how he'd struggled that first night as Prefect to keep track of all the first years but eventually learned all of their names. He thinks of Henry refusing to speak to him because he had

offended Landon, but also of Henry and Mariana ensuring he eat lunch on the days where he'd otherwise disappear into the library, and Henry championing games of Exploding Snap rather than Gobstones after Percy's embarrassing outburst, and how frantically he had fretted over the Valentine he'd sent Mariana when he was courting her.

Mariana had quit most of her electives, but she'd had dozens of friends, too many for Percy to count, and by her seventh year she had a following of younger girls who would go to her for advice, including, Percy suspected, his own sister. Even Alex had been popular in his own way, though he spent most of his time with Oliver and Katie, the Quidditch team's most loyal fan. Theodora had largely kept to herself, but she'd studied for her classes with the same intensity as Percy had, in the first timeline, determined to excel despite the obstacles.

When Percy thinks of Landon, he thinks of those damned Auror Adrian books, and the upsetting knowledge that Landon had chosen *Adrian* for his alias in France. It would have taken someone like Landon to believe enough in the impossible to pursue the Founders Artefacts so seriously—and to believe himself capable of international espionage—and Percy hopes that wherever Landon is, he knows that while he may not have achieved a permanent charm, he'd successfully hoodwinked the French Ministry and helped Percy destroy three Horcruxes once owned by a Founder.

If I had a third life—

Percy stops himself halfway through the thought, looking behind him as if someone had heard it materialise in his mind. In the afternoon sun, Hogwarts is large and brilliant, the stones glowing in the reddish-gold light, the windows in each tower beginning to glow as the students return to their rooms after glasses. He can hear the shouts of Quidditch players beginning their practice, and a group of chattering Hufflepuffs departing from the Great Hall to a late Herbology practical. The castle does not look as if it had hosted the Dark Lord, only a few months prior.

Percy does not say very much as Severus collects him to leave, nor the next day, or the day after. The confused tangle of feelings in his stomach seem to roil uncomfortably every time he timidly tries to examine them. He feels the all-too-familiar sense of guilt and regret, smouldering inside him like the Common Room fire after the students have gone to bed. It's a feeling he recognises not from this timeline but from the last, and right on schedule, too. It's the feeling that he has wasted his life, again, that he has missed out on learning a lesson everyone else has mastered, that his focus and determination in one arena have left the others to grow over in an untidy sprawl.

It's the guilt of inaction and the regret of impetuous pride, the sense of his hackles raising—he had no choice but to act how he did—warring against the sickly sweet knowledge that he'd had every opportunity to choose differently, in this timeline, and he'd failed to do so.

But what Percy regrets now is not who he hurt through his actions, not who he abandoned or misled, but that somewhere along the way he'd let down himself, and that is a far more difficult pill to swallow than it ought to be, all things considered.

He may have lost his magic, but had he ever been a wizard in anything other than name? What did he have to boast about, a few Outstandings, an unreliable Patronus? What would

have been inscribed on his grave had he died—and who would have attended his funeral?

"You must not mope around the house so," says Severus after another two weeks have passed. Percy glances up dully. It feels sometimes that he struggles so hard to take even the smallest step forward, and sometimes with a great deal of effort he leaps ahead, only to be dragged back down by his own unrelenting heavy malaise.

"I'll go for a walk," he says, returning his attention to the book in front of him. He had read nearly the whole thing without moving his eyes, only occasionally leafing over to the new page.

"I am returning to Hogwarts today, to examine the new wards that Minerva and I constructed," Severus says pointedly. Percy bristles automatically at the insistent edge in his voice but remains silent. A few seconds later, Severus sighs irritably through his nose and adds, "I thought you might like to accompany me. You may speak to Myrtle, or your siblings."

"No, thank you," says Percy politely, leafing over another page. In the back of his mind, when the clouds clear in his head long enough for him to remember himself, he has begun formulating a way to communicate with Myrtle from afar, using the linked notebook he had once created for Severus. But since setting up such a thing would require asking Severus to fetch said notebook, and for Percy to return to Hogwarts, the idea has remained purely theoretical. "It's a bit chilly today. I can make supper—I was thinking soup?"

"Percy—" Severus begins tightly. Percy's shoulders draw into himself, but he does not look up to see the exasperation he feels sure is written across Severus' face. Severus does not like this version of Percy; Percy can easily tell without having to ask for clarification that Severus would prefer him to be more animated, perhaps more interesting.

He lingers on an elaborate drawing of a map on the next page of the book. He will not be anything he is not, not anymore, not after he had lost nearly everything else about himself over these last few years. If Severus does not enjoy his company as it is, then they both know what the necessary next steps must be.

“Percy,” says Severus, in a more controlled tone. “I believe that Minerva wishes to speak to you again.”

“Severus,” says Percy, in the same tone. “If Professor McGonagall wishes to speak to me, she may owl me, as she knows where I am living. I don’t want to go to Hogwarts, and no, it’s not because of Tom.”

When Percy looks up, drawn by the curiosity of Severus’ silence, rather than the predictability of his next cutting rejoinder, he sees a smug expression curling the edges of Severus’ lips, as if the other man is holding the card in Exploding Snap that will singe the sleeves off Percy’s robes. Percy pulls his hands into himself automatically, fingers curling over the sleeve holes, as Severus says coolly, “She intends to offer you another apprenticeship, you know.”

Percy's first reaction is incredulity, followed by a swift, burning hunger that settles uneasy into embarrassed anger. "Surely she does not think I believe her offer binding," he scoffs, thinking of that sun-warmed room and a leather-bound notebook. "I hardly would expect her to honour her offer if I were a redeemed Death Eater, let alone a Muggle." Severus raises an eyebrow, and Percy hastily amends, "Or a wizard without magic. Whatever we may call it, Severus, does not escape the fact that I have nothing to offer Hogwarts."

"Unless you've forgotten everything you used to know about magic in these last few months, which I would not think unlikely, given how infrequently you have exercised your brain, I would think you could still complete the proposal you had initiated in your seventh year," says Severus loftily.

Percy imagines for one silver second what it would be like to return to Hogwarts, to the castle filled with magic he cannot access, in order to bury his head in the library and pursue the dizzying flights of incredibly magic, to explore soul magic while his own soul whinged in pain, to write spells that his own body has no hope of willing into being…

"This is not a kindness," he says, which surprises them both into silence.

Severus turns and examines the fireplace, picking up one of the pokers and pushing away a burnt bit of wood that had leaped for freedom. "Minerva does not suffer fools lightly," he says into the fireplace, his voice surprisingly gravelly. "I do not think she intends to offer you kindness for kindness' sake. If she intends to ask you for your time, she must believe you have something worthy to offer."

Percy shakes his head. "You told McGonagall of my role in the war, or so I have surmised, from various comments," he reveals and is rewarded by a slow, surprised blink as Severus turns back toward him. "I think it likely that McGonagall has concluded that there is no other place in Wizarding society that I may occupy and is seeking to provide me—housing, as you did, Severus, by offering your home." Severus begins to respond, but Percy speaks more loudly, authoritatively adding, "I would thank you both, but neither offer is necessary. I do not need charity, nor pity."

Percy is caught by the genuine anger creasing the other man's face. "My offer was not pity, boy," his old professor nearly snarls at him.

"How can you say that? You said specifically that you intended to help me heal my soul; you've been conducting all sorts of research—"

"Because I care for you, you incomparable idiot," Severus says so viciously that Percy's jaw snaps shut with an audible click. He watches mutely as Severus deposits the poker back into the small wire basket with a loud, surprising clang without even bothering to Banish the dust that floats down and coats the floor. "You continue to believe the very worst of everyone; even Tom knew to recognise genuine loyalty, when it was offered to him."

"Severus—"

"I have not asked for you to care for me in return," continues Severus mercilessly. "But I have expected a modicum of mutual respect, given our intertwined history. I have made my

home open to you, and I have offered to help you, and I have weathered your adolescent tantrums with patience, but I will not continue to invest myself in your wellbeing if you do not appreciate my efforts." At the doorway, Severus pauses and says threateningly, "You must respond also to your mother. She has written to invite me to the supper party she is hosting on Halloween, and as I have no intention of attending, I wish for you to convey my regrets."

Percy sits back in his chair, feeling acutely like a small child, as Severus sweeps imperiously from the room. Why is it, he wonders dispiritedly, closing his book, that he can no longer speak to Severus as he once had been able to, before the war? By all accounts, their relationship should have improved—*I care for you*, said Severus, as if such a notion would not have been unthinkable even a year prior—but instead it has deteriorated to the point where Percy does not know if they are equals, or professor and student, or healer and patient, or friends, or merely strangers sharing a house, a small Muggle house that Percy has begun to think of as home.

Part of his conclusion, he realises after an extended walk, not wanting to be home when Severus left for Hogwarts, is that Severus has not been acting with his normal constancy. Percy had seen vulnerability in Severus' eyes over breakfast, and pain written across his face throughout arguments, and insecurity in the lines of his dress robes as he strode through the Ministry like a man facing the gallows to receive an award. By Severus' own admission, he did not know how to heal himself from the scars of war any more than Percy did. In a way, this makes Percy feel as if they could be equals, or perhaps even friends, and in Percy's calmer moments he thinks about how he could help Severus through his own pain. Yet Severus also cooks more competently than Percy would have ever received, and navigates the confusing flow of peace logistics (money, lodgings, food) easily, and researches Percy's condition for him, and often manages to say the right thing in the midst of Percy's extended tantrums. He was proving to be instrumental in repairing Tom's damage on the wards, or so Percy had surmised from his frequent correspondence with McGonagall. Percy has no doubt that if he did decide to focus on his lack of magical core or his torn soul (the Dementor's stone is still in his pocket, though he only touches it cautiously with a finger and never takes it out entirely), then Severus would be ready with diagnostic spells and hypotheses and Healing potions.

After an hour alone in the house, the silence echoing loudly in Percy's ears, he feels sufficiently terrible enough to respond to his mother too. He impulsively asks if she is free for tea that very afternoon, recognising with some of his old self-awareness that he is liable to flee from the task if he pushes it off any longer. So his mother may hate him; what advantage is there to be gained in waiting to find out?

At one point in Percy's life, he had been pragmatic, competent, capable. This feels so long ago that he can hardly remember what it had felt like to have principles to guide his decisions, even if those principles were at times corrupted and arrogant, if not amoral.

I cannot travel, but I am staying with Professor Snape; I can provide Apparation coordinates for a small park in the nearby Muggle village. If I do not hear otherwise, I will be present at the following location at 4 o'clock.

He does not hear otherwise, and Severus still has not returned, and so after three hours of pointless fretting, Percy dresses in his warm Muggle clothes and leaves the note from his mother on the table along with the name of the park that he had sent her. Severus may have finally decided that Percy is not worth the effort of his friendship, but Percy is loath to cause an unnecessary panic by disappearing without a note.

It is a shock to see his mother, so suddenly, in the small Muggle park, seated at a Muggle picnic bench, her greying-red hair pulled back into a ponytail, and wearing a dark navy jumper and trousers. She looks so unlike the picture of Molly Weasley that Percy is accustomed to—floral dresses, loose curls, faded apron, bright, cheerful robes—that at first Percy does not recognise the older woman as his mother.

Once they make eye contact, however, he would be hard-pressed to think of her as anyone else. Feeling inexorably pulled by his gaze, he walks across the small park, the brittle leaves crunching underfoot, and joins her on the picnic bench. She does not rise, which saves him the worry of whether he ought to bow, or hug her, or shake her hand.

“Mother,” he says, uncomfortably.

“Percy,” his mother says, as shortly.

There are so many things that Percy wants to say that he does not know where to start. It surprises him that she has not come with his father; Percy thinks sometimes to himself that his far greater sins were the ones inflicted on Arthur, yet seeing his father does not fill him with the same uneasy dread as it does to see his mother. He wonders now if Severus feels the same, which is why any mention of Eileen Prince has quite the opposite effect on him as mentions of Tobias Snape.

His mother’s body is warm, unfamiliar as it is wrapped in its new outerwear, and Percy cannot help but notice the familiar scent of dried herbs and wind that he associates even now with the Burrow. She sits very tall and very straight next to him, and he feels himself unconsciously adapting to mimic his posture. His mother had taught him to hold a wand and to write with a quill and to preserve fruit in small glass bottles. Perhaps it was by her heritage that he’d been capable of the artistic skill required to resurrect Tom. Their shared claim to the Prewett name hovers in between them, as does the ghost of Lucius Malfoy, and all of the other unpleasant words exchanged in moments of emotion.

“Thank you for coming,” says Percy, in the absence of anything else to say. “Er, I wanted to tell you that I would be attending the next Weasley supper, but that Severus does not feel comfortable attending.” He smiles weakly and tries for a joke. “All the Weasleys in one room, you know. But I thank you for inviting him.”

“He seems to have become a close companion of yours,” says his mother neutrally. He searches for malice in her tone but hears nothing other than the same discomfort he feels inscribed across his shoulders. “Bill has included a place for him at the wedding.”

Conversation of the wedding takes them through the next few minutes, but there is only so much that Percy can say about flower arrangements and guest lists, particularly when it is now the spectre of Auntie Muriel that crowds their table, rather than Lucius.

Then, suddenly, a glimpse of light peering through the darkening clouds. “Congratulations on your award,” Molly says in a rush, and Percy’s ears pinken almost immediately. His mother glances across the wooden table at him, and in her eyes he sees again a glimpse of the understanding he’d thought he’d imagined when he met her gaze across the room in the caverns of the Ministry. “I thought your speech was very insightful.”

“I didn’t know Scrimgeour was going to put me on the spot like that,” Percy demurs, but her praise warms him. “But I suspect everyone else already knew.”

“It was on the program,” Molly says, and taken by surprise, Percy laughs before he can remember to restrain himself.

He’s glad he did, though, as his mother smiles in return, her lips curving into the conspiratorial, mischievous smile that he’d always felt during his childhood that she reserved for him. It was the sort of smile she would bestow on him when, during handwriting practice, he would write letters to one sibling pretending to be another, a trick that only ever could fool Ron or Ginny, or when he’d label his jars of jam *Percy’s Potions*.

“Of course it was,” Percy says, shaking his head ruefully. He had not taken a program, not wanting to see the flowery language written by someone—Julian, most likely. “Serves me right. I was just relieved to get through the night without spilling anything on myself or having anyone figure out that I don’t have my magic anymore.”

Percy can hear the sharp intake of breath that his mother releases before she presses her lips together, clearly trying to forestall any further exclamations. He finds himself reddening further; he had become so used to casually referencing his ailment around Severus that he had forgotten how awful it must be for his mother to hear of it so directly.

But to his surprise, his mother seems to steel herself, leaning across the table as if delivering the words over a closer distance would make them easier to bear. Percy steels himself for her disappointment. “I am sorry you lost your magic,” she says, and Percy suddenly wants to collapse at the cold understanding he can read in her face. “I can’t imagine a higher price for you to pay for your actions in the war.”

An outsider might find these words insulting. Certainly Severus would have raised his eyebrows to hear them, or Draco would have plunged his hand in his pocket for his wand, or Tonks would have hissed in awed surprise. But to Percy, he feels suddenly like his mother is the first person to properly acknowledge that Percy had needed to pay a cost, and he had paid it fairly, and the cost had been high—but so had his sins. “Yes,” he says, and the relief of saying it threatens to overwhelm him, so he says it again. “Yes.”

“It was difficult for me, to see the path you were going down,” she says mercilessly, but he leans toward her, like a flower toward the sun, desperate for her words. “I felt that you were turning away from your family. Even when I knew enough to guess at your intentions, I thought you were…not being honest about your interest in the Dark Arts.” She expels a huff of breath in a humourless laugh and shakes her head. “Percy, I was so proud to hear of the good that you did during the war.”

“You…you were?” Percy wants to wipe his clammy palms on the bench, but he does not want to draw attention to them. “I thought…”

Suddenly, his mother’s face seems to crumple in on itself, and to Percy’s great surprise, she lays one of her hands on his, resting on the cold, rough wood between them. “I believed the worst of you,” she whispers, her fingers tightening on his. “Can you forgive me, Percy?”

“You—of course you did,” Percy stammers back, his eyes widening behind his glasses. “Mother, what else could you have thought? I was so cruel to you and Father…how could you have thought otherwise?”

His mother shakes her head, and Percy notices that with her hair pulled back, her curls look more similar to his, tighter and redder than they usually look cascading down her shoulders. “Even before. From the moment you went to Aunt Muriel’s, I expect, and asked us to teach you the Old Ways. You were just a child, Percy, and I thought you were beyond help.”

“Mother—

But his mother cannot be stopped, though tears have begun to gather at the corners of her eyes, like thin, glistening raindrops. “I looked at you and I thought to myself that perhaps you were the son I would have had with Lucius, had he got his way.”

Molly flinches into herself as the words escape and hang in between them. Percy absorbs them into his skin slowly, waiting for a sting of anger or betrayal. But he cannot find that he is upset to hear her say these things, though it seems from her reaction as though she expects him to storm away in anger and never reply to her letters again. “I can see why you thought that.”

His mother looks at him without comprehension. “I thought this as you were a child, Percy; long before the Death Eaters, long before you joined the Ministry. I thought these things just for your crime of wanting to know your maternal family, as well as your paternal one. I’m a horrid mother, Percy.”

“And I’m a horrid son,” he says with some irony, raising his eyebrows. Though he has spent many months being angry at his mother, in some form or another, he finds now that he cannot remember precisely why. If he had reminded her of Lucius, it was because he had been copying the Malfoys and their brethren intentionally for many years. “Long before the Death Eaters, as you say, I was already an absolute prat to you and Father, let alone the rest of them. And I was interested in Dark Arts. You weren’t *wrong,* Mother.”

“You were so young,” his mother insists disbelievingly, as if they are continuing not to speak in the same language. “McGonagall told me that you had begun to partner with Snape when you were still in Hogwarts, after trying to save Ginny from that diary. You were barely seventeen years old, Percy, and you didn’t feel safe in our home. You felt you had to be *alone*. How could I have made you feel like that?"

Oh, Merlin. Percy stares at his mother with wide, horrified eyes, unable to hear her castigate herself for this clearly incorrect version of events. He really needs to speak to McGonagall and understand what information she had received from Severus, and what she felt acceptable

to share with a broader audience. Percy had been no hero in Hogwarts, nor after, and he certainly had not lied to his parents because he *had not felt safe* in their home. "Mother, that's not what happened at all. I was angry at you and Father, but I left because I knew I wouldn't be able to be seen associating with you."

"You lost your magic because I mistrusted you," continues his mother, pinning him under an awful gaze. "We could have protected you, Percy. We could have helped you, supported you from afar. You were so alone…Percy, you are my son. I should have supported you without question, even without the war. I should have thought the best of you, rather than the worst."

"No—Mother, no," Percy says, passing a hand over his face. "You were right to think the worst of me, for a while, anyway. When I stole the diary from Ginny, I wrote to Tom of my own accord, Mum. Not because I wanted to save Ginny, not because I thought I was doing the right thing. I put the entire school in danger because of my curiosity and my arrogance. I thought that Tom would tell me the secrets of the other Horcruxes, but that was no excuse to take him on myself, rather than asking for help."

"He was an incredibly powerful wizard, Percy, and you were just a boy."

"He flattered me," admits Percy, meeting his mother's eyes. "He told me that you did not care for me, which I knew was untrue, but I let myself believe it. He encouraged me to pursue Dark Magic, and I did, even though I knew it was wrong. I used him as an excuse to exercise all of my bad habits, and I concealed the truth from Dumbledore, even after the Chamber was open and Ginny and Ron were nearly killed. There is no excuse for that, Mum. I was old enough to know better."

His mother shakes her head, her voice hushed. "Percy, you wrote to a part of His soul. You could not have been expected to outwit his influence, particularly at sixteen. You did not know what would happen—"

"I knew," says Percy, and the truth cracks and shatters between them. "I knew, Mum."

Her brow is furrowing, and she is confused, but Percy is already talking, quickly, the words spilling over themselves.

"I knew because it happened before, Mum. In another life—I was the same evil git that I'd been in this life, and the diary controlled Ginny, and then when the Dark Lord came back to life he killed Fred, and it was my fault, Mum, like all of this was my fault." He shakes his head, feeling an incredulous laugh bubble up inside him. "Even with a lifetime of foresight, I made all of the same mistakes."

His mother's wand is in her hand. He notices and feels incredibly sad at the sight, though he supposes it is justified, given that he must sound like a raving madman. "What do you mean, Percy?"

And so he tells her the whole thing. Almost certainly he oughtn't have, and almost certainly this will have consequences he is not prepared to accept. But he cannot sit there in front of his tearful mother and not have her understand how black his heart really is, how arrogant he had been, how incredibly idiotic his actions had been. Society could view him as a hero, or a

double agent, or an opportunistic twat, but his mother deserved to know the truth of what her son was, despite it all.

She is very silent for the telling. He does not go into explicit detail; to retell the events of the last decade would take more time and energy than he could summon. But he tells her that he had known many of the details of the upcoming war, and that he'd had every opportunity to learn the rest of the events before twisting himself back through time but he had chosen not to equip himself with that knowledge. He tells her that he'd known what the diary of Tom Riddle was, but allowed Ginny to write in it anyway. He tells her that he had lied deliberately to Dumbledore, again and again, and only confided in Severus when the other man had forced his hand. He tells her about Tom, that he'd painted a picture of him and enchanted him to live in his flat, and that Tom had nearly killed Arthur due to Percy's incredibly Dark life ward, and that Percy had torn his soul into shreds to defeat Tom at the very end.

The story seems out of place in this small, Muggle park, but then again, so is Percy. Percy does not fit in here, and he does not fit in back in the Wizarding World, and he supposes he will never fit in anywhere else again. Certainly he cannot imagine his family will accept him, once his mother returns to them and informs them of his multi-year deception, his strange, mutant self. At several points during the story, he expects his mother to stand angrily and stride away, or slap him across the head, or burst into tears.

At the very end, she only looks at him in silence, and then she does the one thing that Percy would not have expected of his mother, even now: she leans over the table and wraps him in a hug, the first hug he's received from his mother since his graduation from Hogwarts, and he begins to shake in her arms as he smells the damned rosemary that he knows is growing out of a little pot on the windowsill and the faint aroma of baking bread that must be cooling on the countertop and the clean fresh smell of a warm, sunny kitchen. He does not burst into tears, though his face feels uncomfortably warm and damp, but he trembles as his mother hugs him, and he feels her body shaking in response to his distress.

"You did so well, Percy," she whispers in his ear, and now the trembles do turn into tears as his mother still does not push him away in disgust. "I'm so proud of you. In this timeline and the last."

It is everything he's ever longed to hear from her, but he cannot believe it. He cannot allow the words to penetrate the thick shell he has grown around his chest, the brick walls he has built in his mind in the absence of his mental protections. But the words burrow nevertheless into the cracks in his defences, stinging painfully as they worm their way into his body, and he finds himself dissolving into an utter sodden mess as he tries futilely to fight them off.

"How?" Percy asks, choking over the words, and his mother squeezes him even tighter. In the question are all of the other questions that Percy cannot bring himself to ask: how she can be proud of him, when he killed Fred, and endangered Ron, and traumatised Ginny, and involved Charlie and Bill in the war, and burned down George's joke shop, and nearly killed Arthur?

"You are my son in any timeline, Percy," says Molly, and Percy burrows his head into his mother's shoulder, his glasses pressing painfully against his nose. The surface of the table is awkward and cold between them, but he ignores his discomfort. A part of him hopes that this

hug will never end, and as long as it continues, he does not have to admit that out loud. “and I am so proud to know you. Can you forgive me for thinking so poorly of you?”

“I was really upset,” Percy admits with the privacy of his mother’s hug, mumbling the words into the embrace. He sounds like he is about twelve years old, which should be even more embarrassing when he factors in his true age, but for this single impossible moment he does not allow himself to dwell on it. “When you didn’t visit me. I thought…I thought you hated me.”

“I hated myself,” his mother responds, pulling away. “I don’t know if you can understand that.”

Percy huffs out a laugh around the tears, wiping his face on the arm of his coat. “I can, actually,” he says, raising his eyes to meet his mother’s. “You once said that I was the most like you, of everyone.”

“So I did.” His mother regards him for a long moment before she bestows upon him a smile, slightly cautious and not effusive, but a smile nevertheless. “Would you like to come to the Burrow for some tea?”

“I don’t want any tea,” Percy says, wrinkling his nose. At his mother’s surprised expression, he hurries to elaborate. “Everyone wants to have tea with me now since they can’t do anything else, and it’s never pleasant. I’m sick of drinking tea.”

“Perhaps a stiff drink,” his mother offers, and the novel offer, combined with her unexpected clothing, makes Percy think to himself bizarrely that perhaps he and his mother might have gotten along earlier, had they been able to interact in another world. “I’m partial to gin myself.”

“So am I,” says Percy, and he stands, his joints creaking loudly, as if he had been sitting for over a decade, rather than a few minutes. “Can you send word to Severus? I don’t want him to worry.”

His mother gives him a look that seems to sear and look straight through him. “Yes, I think I’d like to hear more about Severus,” she says, and Percy, to his surprise, blushes straight through to his toes. “But yes. I’ll send Erroll with a note when we’re back. I assume you can Side-Along?”

“Yes,” he says, taking her proffered arm. “Yes, I can.”

And to his surprise, his mother’s Side Along is the first one that does not make Percy feel as though he is going to retch all over his shoes.

ENDINGS & BEGINNINGS (2/2)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: ENDINGS & BEGINNINGS (2/2)

1998— (Percy is 22 & 35, Severus is 37, and both are struggling to adjust to life after war)

Percy's reconciliation with his mother does him good, or so Severus decides in the days that follow. He does not outwardly change his behaviour, and most of the exhaustion that gathers into dark clouds beneath his eyes continues to press itself into his skin each day. Yet something changes with how Percy holds himself, some loosening of the shoulders or relaxing of the lips, that suggests that speaking with his mother had lifted his burden, at least marginally.

Severus is glad. He does not make it a habit to think of his own mother—though in the cookbook that he and Percy have nearly completed, he occasionally comes across a note made in her spiky scrawl, an adjustment to a recipe or an observation—but he can admit with the maturity of a man nearly forty years old that he would have liked to say goodbye to her, at least once.

Eileen Prince had done very little for him, but by the same token, she had done everything that she could to shield him from Tobias' smouldering rage and thunderous bouts of violence. She had taught him the fundamentals of the first year Hogwarts curriculum in small, furtive bursts of defiance throughout his childhood so that he easily passed his written tests when he finally arrived. It had proved to be a small blessing, considering that Severus barely had time to study during his first year, given that he had to spend the majority of his time fielding off attacks from his unpleasant Housemates who were not particularly inclined to accept a half-blood with a Muggle last name for a peer.

Severus still does not know, decades later, whether maintaining his friendship with Lily had made his life easier or more difficult to bear. Certainly during those first few years, where he and Lily were able to meet regularly in the multitude of private places the Hogwarts castle offered to its occupants, he had relied on her friendship, her understanding, her increasingly ludicrous suggestions that he enchant random areas to sleep in rather than returning to his hostile room each night. Severus can still remember her wide-eyed innocence as she tried to convince him to move his things to a broom closet near the base of Gryfindor tower. Though for all of their subterfuge, neither party had been completely capable of hiding their friendship from their peers, which Severus can now admit caused him a disproportionate amount of retaliation from the Slytherin contingent *and* the Gryffindors, whereas Lily emerged relatively unscathed.

It had been worth it for him, though. It had been worth it to learn how to ward his bed, how to protect his belongings with a Dark ritual, how to raise a nonverbal shield and keep it wrapped around his body nearly continuously. It had been worth it to make his excuses to his classmates, to hear their lewd suggestions as to why Severus would often be found in broom closets and abandoned classrooms, to continue partnering with Lily in Potions even as Slughorn lavished praise on her for his accomplishments. (Lily, for all her strength in Charms, was not particularly *skilled* at the finicky art of Potions, but how could Severus begrudge her, when he could sit next to her for two hours at a time, and smell the floral scent of her hair, and have her undivided attention as he painstakingly explained why mixing moon-beans with sunflowers would produce a volatile reaction?)

And with Halloween just days away, Severus cannot help but think of Lily, constantly, to the point that it becomes nearly distracting. For nearly eighteen years, Severus had been able to keep his thoughts of Lily under control, allowing himself the painful luxury each night of telling her silently of his day, or occasionally relating to her something that her idiotic son accomplished despite the other half of his gene pool. (To James, he told only of Potter's many failures). *Lily, your son made the Quidditch team in his first year. Lily, your son battled a basilisk for his friends. Lily, your son sniffed out the mongrel, despite a castle of Hogwarts professors attempting to keep him safe. Lily, your son battled the Dark Lord, and he survived, not once, but twice. Lily, your son died for us, and I can't hate him anymore, and I don't know what to do without you.*

Percy's friendship with Potter is as frustrating as it is inexplicable to Severus, who can admit grudgingly that Potter is approaching something resembling maturity, but cannot understand why Percy corresponds with him semi-regularly via owl. It still rankles, somewhere in the back of Severus' mind, that Percy had asked Potter to take him home, that Potter had found him after he disappeared where Severus had not thought it necessary to follow Percy after his flight from the Ministry. Severus does not see many similarities between Potter and Percy, and he wishes that Percy spent his time on more productive ventures.

So it comes as a surprise when Percy announces that he does not intend to attend the Halloween celebration with his family. Severus had been expecting him to spend most of the day there, leaving him to his own private miseries, and in truth he had been looking forward to an unobserved evening to drink his way steadily to midnight and then stagger upstairs, as was generally his tradition on the Samhain night.

"Why?" Severus asks suspiciously, looking for pity in Percy's guileless face.

Percy shrugs. "I don't think I have the energy for it," he explains, which has been his standard excuse for anything he does not wish to do. Severus eyes him carefully but cannot see any other motives hidden behind the glint of Percy's glasses.

"Your parents did not rescind the invitation, did they?" Severus has never particularly liked Molly or Arthur Weasley, though he has never particularly disliked them, either, and he remains on alert in case they wield further weapons against their maligned son.

Percy shakes his head. "No," he confirms, and the barest suggestion of a bashful smile plays at the bow of his lips, as if he remains surprised to hear that his parents wish to associate with him. Severus wants to roll his eyes. He thinks that Percy had forgiven Molly Weasley far too

quickly, given her inexcusable distrust of her son. It should have been obvious at least to Molly and Arthur that Percy was acting out of desperation, or at least out of a desire for deception, and Severus does not think that *shame* is any sort of excuse to avoid speaking to Percy for so many months. The Tonks girl had gathered her courage far earlier than two consummate Gryffindors, and all of the Weasley children besides. “But I think the night will centre around Harry, and I don’t know if I have the energy for it.”

This explanation is more satisfying to Severus, who cannot imagine a worse fate than to be trapped with the Weasley family and their hanger-ons while Potter reminisced about his parents. But it throws a bit of a wrench into Severus’ plans; though he has seen Percy indulge in the odd hand-mixed cocktail or glass of red wine, he knows that Percy does not approve of heavy drinking, and will certainly not be content to leave Severus alone on such an emotionally-charged night.

Throughout the rest of the day, Severus tries to ensure that they have a normal routine, emphasising that he is not liable to fall into dripping tears at the first reminder of Lily. He forces them into their customary trip to the shops, and even gives Percy the money for the first time, watching as Percy fumbles his way through the Muggle bills. They make their rounds to the small local library, where the librarian—an ancient woman that unfortunately remembers Severus from his youth—smiles warmly at them, as she does each time they enter together, and shows Severus to the collection of science magazines she saves for him. Severus has been taking this opportunity to work his way through a book of Muggle chemistry, a subject he had occasionally referenced but never studied in full, as Percy spends his evenings reading childish novels, such as *Auror Adrian*. Honestly. Severus does not see the appeal, but Percy has read four of the books in the series and Tobias Greengrass had recently sent him an additional six from his personal collection.

They, perhaps appropriately, finish his mother’s book of French cooking, making the last two recipes for lunch and then for supper, and Severus closes the book with some solemnity despite himself. His mother had never cooked any of these recipes for him—though he can remember a few of the desserts, if he forces himself to think to his early childhood—and he cannot help but wonder whether the book is a remnant from the early days of her marriage or the final days of her life. Perhaps French cooking was an attempt for a young Eileen to bring refinement into her unexpectedly morose marriage—Tobias as the young dashing soldier would have been a far cry from Tobias as the sullen factory worker, a decade later—or an attempt for an older Eileen to harken back to her pureblooded past after Tobias’ death during Severus’ sixth year. The Prince family had been a family of some renown, once. Perhaps Eileen had dined on these dishes and once entertained thoughts of feeding them to her son.

“Thanks for sharing these recipes with me,” says Percy gravely, who must be under the impression that these are the dishes of Severus’ youth, and their cooking them together was an activity of great import.

“It provided me with an opportunity to correct your poor cooking skills,” Severus responds coolly, to forestall any further emotional declarations, but Percy only grins at him, as if the insult barely had any effect. Severus is finding it increasingly difficult to parse Percy’s moods, to see if he continues to linger in depression or angry, purposeful resolution, or whether he is mimicking the more cheerful boy he had once been before Tom. Severus does

not know whether Percy's ability to slide smoothly between these extremes is positive—it seems as if it ought to be better than the early days, where Percy spent most of the days firmly mired in depression—or negative, and if Severus ought to do anything other than respond in kind, when he can.

(Whether Severus remains mired in depression is a topic he does not dwell on. At times he too feels unfettered, a lightness in his stomach, like when Percy begins to cheerfully tease him about his own ingredient preparation, though at other times he feels like his feet are made of lead, as they do when he walks to the parlour after supper and settles in his chair without a glass of wine at his side).

But Percy surprises him. He leaves the parlour for just long enough for Severus to conclude that Percy has tactfully left Severus alone for the remainder of the evening, but then returns with a crystal decanter of amber liquid—a fine whiskey, judging from the smell when Percy carefully extracts the top—and two glasses.

"The Minister," says Percy in response to Severus' brief quizzical look. "And the decanter set is from Yaxley, if you can believe it. Not *quite* the done gift, but either he thought I wouldn't know better, or he didn't know better."

"I did not know that you were in contact with Corbin Yaxley," Severus says with a small, private frown as Percy carefully measures out two generous portions of the whiskey. Severus is pleased to note that even without magic, Percy can measure by feel a precise number of ounce, though he watches quizzically as Percy nearly tops off each glass. Perhaps Percy is more in line with Severus' original plans for the evening than Severus had thought, though Severus does not trust Percy not to kill himself in an attempt to keep up with Severus' ability to consume large quantities of alcohol, honed over nearly four decades of life.

Severus feels more displeased than he ought to hear that Percy is reconnecting with some of his less savoury companions, though with Corbin's elevation to self-proclaimed protector of the saviour of the Wizarding World, Severus supposes such a relationship is not publicly unacceptable. Whether Percy ought to be corresponding with Corbin is another issue altogether.

Percy carries the glasses gingerly over to Severus, handing one over and then setting the other carefully on top of a coaster that he balances over the books that he continues not to read. Severus has long since decided not to press the issue, choosing to view their continued presence next to Percy's chair as a minor victory, but he eyes the balanced glass with a disapproving expression, though Percy has never displayed the proclivity for knocking things over that several of his siblings possessed in amble measure. (Ginerva and William had been the best, after Percy, at Potions, though neither seemed to possess a proper appreciation for the art).

"I thought we may toast to Lily," Percy says, his voice hitching slightly on the name. Severus observes the flush prickling his neck and lower cheeks and hopes his own face is not betraying the turmoil that immediately erupts at *her* name said in *his* voice. "And Regulus. And Lucius, if you'd like."

“And to your friend, Landon Greengrass,” Severus adds quietly. Percy flinches at the name but nods solemnly, his eyes bright behind his glasses. Something that Severus has never grown accustomed to with Percy is his ease with tears, how unashamed he is to show his emotions. Tobias Snape would have ground his son into the dirt before allowing him to cry openly, but Severus does not find the hint of tears gathering in Percy’s eyes to be as unmanly as his father would have, had he seen it.

“Auntie Muriel and Andromeda taught me a toast of honour,” Percy says, rising with his glass to face the fireplace, which crackles and pops agitatedly in front of them, as if sensing his intentions. “So I cannot say which of the Old Ways it follows. That they agreed on it suggests to me that it is common to both sides, which I think may be appropriate for this night.”

Severus inclines his head, joining Percy so that they stand, shoulder by shoulder, warmed only by their shared presence and the flickering flames. Percy straightens, holding out his glass, and begins to speak in confident, ringing Latin, his lips forming the words as if he regularly conversed in Latin rather than English. It sends a shiver down Severus’ spine to hear Percy’s voice take on its formal, ancient cadence, and though they are in a Muggle home and toasting without magic, Severus feels the hair on the back of his neck rise, as if they were in the presence of the ancient magic in the caves. His magic hisses and swirls around him, responding to the change in the atmosphere as Percy continues, calling upon the gods of old to honour the sacrifices of their compatriots, to bless their passage into the afterworld, to bring vengeance upon their enemies and justice upon their families.

Severus has never been educated in the Old Ways, though he taught himself Latin somewhere between his third and fourth year at Hogwarts, but the words feel familiar to him, right, as if calling to some instinct in his breast, the baying of dogs after a golden horn, the exultant cry of an army on the crashing shore of an ancient beach, the solemn, persistent chanting of a circle of warlocks with their arms raised to the heavens.

And then Percy begins to chant the names of the dead in a soft, gentle tone, so that the shiver building on the back of Severus’ neck slithers down his spine. He speaks their full names, and it clenches something inside Severus’ stomach to hear *Lily Josephine Evans Potter,* to know that Percy had researched Lily’s middle name for the purpose of this toast. The image that comes into Severus' head now is not that of horns, or soldiers, or heroes, but of the soft quiet light of a moon shining over a sleeping field, each blade of grass coated in molten silver, though it has been many years since Severus had cause to pause and notice the grass underfoot.

“Now we pour the whiskey into the fire,” says Percy quietly, his fingers tightening on the glass. In the reflection of the refracted crystal shapes, the deep glow of the flames seem to engulf Percy’s hand, and Severus feels his own fingers begin to burn in sympathy. “As a sacrifice to those who are no longer with us. We may ask for a wish for them as we do so, something to soothe their souls, wherever they may be.”

Severus swallows. To give a wish to Lily, wherever she is—to sum up the riotous turmoil in his heart—he is almost pathetically grateful when Percy steps forward and begins to pour his

glass into the flames, the thin stream of liquid steaming as it hits the crackling logs, sending the spiced scent into the air.

“For Landon Tobias Greengrass, I wish for him that he finds permanence, in the world after this,” Percy intones quietly as the fire swells around his offering. He pulls the glass back to his body, and Severus notices that some of the whiskey remains, swirled at the bottom of the glass.

Severus clears his throat and steps forward, modulating the stream of whiskey so that he too would have some left over, in case there was a secondary part of the ritual that Percy had not revealed. “For Regulus Arcturus Black, I wish for him that he finds recognition, in the world after this,” Severus says, thinking of the boy that he had once known with flashing grey eyes and an impish smile, so desperate to prove himself that he joined and then betrayed the Dark Lord. “To Lucius Abraxas Malfoy, I wish for him that he finds refinement, in the world after this.” Lucius would smirk at that, if he could hear it, which feels an appropriate way to honour him. Then, his mouth dry, Severus forces himself to continue, turning his thoughts to Lily, and the warmth of her smile, and how cold she had been, when he had found her, how her gleaming red hair had looked like blood in the candlelight of the room. “And…and for Lily Josephine Evans Potter, I wish for her that she may find…peace, in the world after this.”

To his horror, Severus feels his own eyes begin to fill with tears, though he has of course not cried since that last horrid Halloween, since he had realised the depths of his failures, that he had come to terms with the fact that he had killed his best friend, based on nothing more than his own hurt pride and his own terrible arrogance, that Albus had promised to save her and yet *let her die*, so that the boy may live, and the Dark Lord may be defeated.

But he does not regret what he had said. Lily had been many things in life, but she had never been at peace, something that Severus sees in her son, in his constant need to seek out entertainment or struggle or absolution. Lily had hungered for more, for better things, for a new future, and she had never gotten it, because he had stolen all of her futures from her, and left her to die in a cold, empty house.

Percy steps forward again, and Severus takes the opportunity to angrily blink away the tears. His own voice steady, Percy looks into the fire and says, “And to Tom Marvolo Riddle, I wish for him that he may find freedom, in the world after this.”

When Percy turns to face Severus as he steps back from the fire, his glass now emptied, Severus is silenced by the same look of sorrow that he feels reflected in his own face, by the boundless understanding that gleams between them more brightly than the fire that still dances at their feet. It shocks Severus and it strengthens him, and he finds himself stepping forward before he can regret what he is doing, and pouring the last of his offering into the flames, as he says in a voice barely audible, “And for Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, I wish for him that he may find happiness, in the world after this.”

And when Severus turns back to Percy, he views him through eyes blurred with tears, and he finds that he cannot feel embarrassed, not with the heat of the fire and the warmth of Percy’s gaze. Though Severus does not allow the tears to fall, when he goes to bed, hours later, sober save for a single glass of the whiskey, he finds that his throat and chest are loosened, as if he had released the sob that had lingered half-caught in his throat for the rest of the evening.

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December 1998

Nothing outwardly changes between Percy and Severus after Percy dared to presume that Severus would appreciate his efforts to toast the dead, except that Percy feels cautiously confident that Severus *had* appreciated his efforts, and that knowledge seems to change everything.

It changes things for Percy, at least, who finds himself able to relax just marginally in Severus' presence. The knowledge that his mother does not hate him, and that his old professor is at least somewhat interested in having him as her student, and that even Severus had thawed by the heat of the fire—all of these accomplishments crackle and pop inside Percy's breast and loosen some of the ashes caked into his throat.

The first time that he teases Severus, unable to prevent himself from laughing at the expression on Severus' face when Percy catches him with one of Landon's adventure books, he tenses immediately after, waiting for Severus to purse his lips and sweep angrily from the room. Yet after only a mere second's hesitation, Severus gives a rueful shrug and returns imperiously to the novel, concentrating on it intently, which Percy rules as a victory. Percy takes one of his Potions journals in exchange and finds to his surprise that he is still fascinated by Potions, to the point where two hours drop away and both men are still embroiled in their opposite reading material.

Percy relaxes, and perhaps living in Severus' house is an advanced form of tutelage, for as he relaxes it seems so does Severus. But Percy cannot *entirely* relax as November trundles its way toward December and the inevitable conclusion of this strange, unprecedented year. McGonagall's offer—not yet given, at least not in person—echoes in his head, as well as the almost guilty realisation that as each passing day is coated by a light dusting of contentedness, Percy finds that within him, he is hungering for something *more.*

It is not *Severus*. In fact, when Percy thinks of the coming months, he finds it very hard, if not impossible, to imagine any sort of life without Severus, or at least without Severus' snarky humour and long-suffering support. It is not Severus that makes his life feel so small. Following his perusal of the Potions journals, Percy begins to debate theory again with Severus, and those days fill him with a shade of his old fierce exultant joy, when he would attend tutelage grimly determined to succeed at the task that Severus had set for him, and each concession from his professor would fill him with pleased joy.

It is not the neighbourhood either, nor the Muggles. Percy has found, after over nine months living among them, that the Muggles are not very different from any of the foreign wizards that he had met, and in some ways, are more similar to him than they. Certainly half of their conversations at the shops mean nothing to Percy, as if they are speaking a separate language only nominally related to English, and their accents are different both to the posh pureblood

tones of the Malfoys and the cheerful country drawl of the Diggorys. Yet Percy quite likes many of the Muggles he's met, and from what he has gleaned of their culture, they are living rich and complex lives, containing a dizzying quantity of references to topics that Percy can barely begin to understand, and dealing with political issues and fiscal insecurity of their very own.

But at the same time, Percy cannot entertain the thought of doing anything *else*. Lately even dragging himself out of the house to see Tonks or Bill or even his parents is *exhausting*, truly exhausting, so that when he returns it is all he can do to drag himself into bed. But he is tired of sleeping, and he is tired of doing nothing, so that he at times feels trapped between the two impulses, his body slowly being flattened by his twin desires.

To instead return to Hogwarts, as a new type of student, to be so close to the magic that used to be his birthright…would he be able to bear it? Percy has not become accustomed to his lack of magic, but he has been able to prevent himself from lingering on it, but such an act would be impossible in a castle *brimming* with magic, even if Percy were able to overcome the memories that Hogwarts still evokes for him, that at times weave themselves into his nightmares. Myrtle would be there, and McGonagall, and Cedric, but so would the basilisk, slithering underneath the ground.

Percy would speak to Severus about his dilemma, but though Percy has relaxed and Severus has in turn, there is a strange undercurrent to Severus' actions, as if he were concealing a still and quiet ocean that nevertheless would drag an intruder into the depths without mercy.

Severus returns to Percy his linked notebook, which Percy takes with a frown, as if Severus wished to imply that he would have no need to speak to Percy, if he were to go to Hogwarts. He makes a bundle of Galleons without being asked and provides them to Percy in a sturdy dragon-leather pouch, enough Galleons for Percy to remain at Hogwarts for a year without braving Gringotts for funds. And, in what seems like the worst offence to Percy, Severus repairs his old Hogwarts trunk, which had been sitting, miniaturised, at the foot of Percy's bed for many months, and offers in a neutral tone to discard anything that Percy may no longer find useful.

"I haven't decided that I'm going," snaps Percy at this last, the sight of his old cherished Hogwarts trunk an abrupt and unwelcome interruption into the quiet solitude of his afternoon.

Severus' face seems to indicate that he considers it a foregone conclusion that Percy would accept McGonagall's offer, and Percy opens and closes his mouth fruitlessly, unable to articulate why he would not want to returned to the hallowed halls of learning that for many years had been his only refuge. "You will."

Severus' assumption rankles Percy, who draws himself up and spits out, "If you do not want me here, then you ought to say so, plainly, instead of resorting to measures such as these."

"You may stay here as long as you wish," Severus responds evenly, "but you ought to make your decision carefully, Percy. An apprenticeship with Minerva would smooth many of the paths in your way that threaten to be dangerous."

Percy knows what Severus means, and though Severus does not believe him, he is not as offended at the idea of McGonagall's pity as everyone would expect. Percy does not have magic, and therefore he will not be able to study further at a university after his apprenticeship, nor teach at an institution, nor practise in any way what he proposed. Yet McGonagall is very well respected in her field, and her sponsorship of him could help in many ways. Still, something sticks in his throat and makes him unable to say out loud what Severus seems to expect: that he will return to Hogwarts and both of them will be once again alone.

This December is a mild one, with wan winter sunlight streaming through Percy's windows —he still has not bought curtains, so that he wakes with the sun each morning, though he often lingers in bed for several hours, watching as the colours of the sky go through their slow, melting dance toward daytime—and Percy cannot shake the feeling that the year has already ended, and spring has begun to sprout out of the barren brown ground. It is as if the weather is taunting him, to inform him crisply that the rest of the world has moved beyond their gusts of stormy weather, and he could luxuriate in the warmth of the sun if he only could bring himself to go outside.

And so when McGonagall requests Severus' assistance at the end of term to bolster the wards after the students have left the castle, Percy contemplates remaining home again. If he sees McGonagall, McGonagall will force the issue, and Percy still does not know what to say. Then at last, he shakes his head and forces himself to stand. He cannot speak about his feelings with Severus, not with Severus in the strange, brittle mood, as if Percy is choosing to go off and die and never speak to him again. Why ought he prevent himself from speaking to McGonagall?

Only minutes after they arrive in McGonagall's office, Severus excuses himself and stalks from the room, his face set in a forbidding scowl. Percy watches him go, feeling chastised, which of course is ridiculous. Severus ought to be happy that Percy came along and is confronting his future, not upset at him.

"So," McGonagall says, her voice carefully neutral, "May I ask how living with Severus is going?"

For a second, Percy bristles—but when he glances up to McGonagall, he spots humour in her eyes, and he allows himself to relax and smile. "Trying," he admits dryly. "Severus seems to be quite upset at me of late. I think he wants me to leave but cannot figure out how to tell me."

"Severus is an intensely private man," McGonagall agrees, and Percy tries to ignore the sight of Dumbledore pretending to sleep instead of listening. "It is a marvel he allowed you into his home at all."

Percy wants to say something, but he can't quite figure out what it is, so he only shrugs and responds, "He's been very welcoming, all things considered, but I don't blame him for wanting his own privacy again."

(Yet doesn't he blame Severus? Isn't he angry at how clearly Severus wishes to say goodbye? Percy wrenches his mind away forcefully from the thought. He will not think of saying

goodbye to Severus until it is necessary, until he has made his decision more fully.)

“Speaking of privacy,” says McGongall with a touch of irony, and Percy smirks at the ripple of discontent on Dumbledore’s painted face, “I thought we might move to my old office.”

“Are you still the Head of Gryffindor House?”

“For now,” McGonagall says, standing and shepherding them out of the door and down the spiral staircase. “There is not an eligible Gryffindor among the professors, if you can believe it.”

Perhaps too many Gryffindors of that age had been killed in the last war, Percy cannot help but think, mentally roving through the list of professors as they walk to McGonagall’s office at the base of Gryffindor Tower. There are certainly far more Ravenclaws and Slytherins on the staff, though that could perhaps be attributed to differences in career goals. Most of Percy’s Housemates had not been particularly keen on their own lessons, let alone on teaching others.

Her office looks very much the same as Percy remembers, though of course it has been many years since he had last seen the light slanting through the windows. He finds himself relaxing immediately as he takes his seat in front of her desk. “I can’t find another Transfiguration professor that I would trust to take over,” McGonagall huffs as she hunts for a packet of ginger biscuits. “Dawlish applied, if you can believe it. I had to tell him that the students are not likely to accept his leadership, not after the fiasco with Dolores, his ten Outstandings be damned.”

Percy smiles distractedly but does not respond. His attention has been caught by the large rectangular window to his right; it is an enchanted window, so for most of his time at Hogwarts, it had been centred on the Quidditch pitch, either for McGonagall’s own amusement or so that she can keep an eye on the injury-prone practices, but she has since focused it on the problematic boundary of the wards, where Percy can just make out Severus following an invisible path, his eyes tracking some output of a spell that Percy cannot see. Severus stalks toward the same copse of trees in the Forbidden Forest as before, the waving branches of the Whomping Willow only a few metres away. Percy can tell by the savage way that Severus’s small figure is digging his feet into the ground with each step that he is still upset.

“Mr. Weasley,” McGonagall says crisply, as if he were eleven, and his attention snaps back to her. He finds himself straightening obediently. The familiar scent of ginger biscuits and strongly-brewed tea only add to the illusion that he is seventeen again and waiting for her to review his latest proposal. “Thank you for accompanying Severus today. I know that returning to Hogwarts can be a trial for you.”

“Severus mentioned that you wished to speak to me,” Percy says politely but firmly. He has had quite a long time to think through McGonagall’s proposal, and though he still feels seized around the middle with indecision, he thinks he is ready at least to hear from her what she may think, so that he may make his decision with open eyes.

McGonagall nods approvingly. “As Severus may have implied, I have a proposition for you, and I ask that you not dismiss it out of hand.” She hesitates and then looks at him solidly in the eyes. “I wish for you to return to Hogwarts and complete an apprenticeship under my supervision. I am asking you to consider this for three reasons: the first, that I genuinely believe that your insights into the field of Transfiguration and soul-based magic are novel and have the potential to push the field forward tremendously; the second, that I think returning to Hogwarts in scholarship would provide you a sense of closure and opportunity to heal; and the third, that completing a Hogwarts apprenticeship will open doors for you that would otherwise remain closed.”

Percy’s first reaction is the flare up of singed pride that immediately urges him to protest that he does not need pity, nor a safe place to *heal*. His second reaction is more muted, and he shakes his head in rueful relief to hear it all laid out so plainly. Of course McGonagall thinks he has something academically of value; she would not have given him an offer initially if she did not think he had insights worth sharing. But of course she would not renew her offer without cause, as Percy had told Severus, and she was in her own way offering him a gift.

“To be honest, Professor, I do not know what I want to do,” Percy admits, as he ought to have five years prior, sitting in this same classroom on a warm day near the end of term. Her blink of surprise informs him that she had been expecting more of an outburst, and Percy is relieved despite himself that Severus had revealed her intentions so early, so that he was able to process his feelings over a matter of months, rather than seconds. “I appreciate the offer tremendously and do not mean to spurn it, but at the same time, I find myself entertaining certain…reservations with returning to Hogwarts.”

“There are ghosts within these halls,” agrees McGonagall, her eyes surprisingly understanding. “And more too immortalised in the portraits upon our walls. I understand your hesitation, Mr. Weasley, but I can assure you that with time, you will be comfortable within the castle once more.”

“It’s not that.”

“Is my offer itself not to your liking?” McGonagall leans forward, the scent of tea curling between them. “Mr. Weasley, I assure you that I am genuine when I say that I believe your work could have an impact on our society.”

“No, it’s not that, either,” explains Percy, as fruitlessly now as in his own mind. He hesitates, looking at his august professor, and says plaintively, “This is everything I’ve ever wanted, Professor. I don’t have my magic, and I would be lying to say that I’m not concerned about completing an apprenticeship without it, but that isn’t it, either.”

“Percy, you may speak plainly—and you may call me Minerva, if you dare,” McGonagall says quietly, and Percy smiles without humour. He would speak plainly, if he could, if he could untangle the confusion in his mind and identify the truth. “I have long considered myself your mentor, and I would be happy to help you think through this decision. You need not give me an answer today—”

“I’m tired,” Percy admits, and he wants to sag into the chair and dissolve into the floor. He glances out of the window, which is still trained on Severus far below, a tiny figure

examining the colourful output of a spell in silence. This is what he cannot say to Severus, who even in peace is often brimming with energy and focus and direction, but Percy finds it easier to say to McGonagall, who had always been for him a beacon of support. “I don’t know if I *want* to study…anything, regardless of the subject. I’ve been reading children’s books, Professor.” He shakes his head, avoiding her eyes, continuing to watch as Severus draws magic from the ground. “I can’t do magic, and I think I’ve come to the point where I could study it without feeling…bereft, or at least without feeling hopeless. But I can’t imagine coming to Hogwarts and—and waking up every day, and completing a course of study, and being a *student* again. I can’t do it. I can’t do anything at all, but I’m so *tired* of feeling exhausted.”

McGonagall sighs, a mournful sort of sigh, and when Percy looks back to her he sees to his surprise that she looks very much as if she feels the same exhaustion that has been weighing down his every movement, as if dragging his bones prematurely toward the ground. “You need not do anything at all, my boy,” she says, and Percy blinks at the term of endearment, which he has never heard from McGonagall. Even his given name is still unfamiliar from her lips, and he would have thought that he’d imagined *my boy* if he had not seen the sorrowful downward tilt to her pale, wrinkled lips. “You may rest, if that is indeed what you wish.”

“But I can’t *rest* for the rest of my life,” says Percy in a small voice, feeling his stomach squeeze painfully with the desire to do precisely that.

“You once asked me to believe you, if you came to me with an unbelievable story,” McGonagall says quietly, and Percy tenses at once at the unfamiliar edge in her tone. “You have not come to me with that story, Percy, but I have learned it nevertheless, and I understand why you could not confide in me earlier. But please trust that I have a glimpse into the greater picture when I speak, and I ask you to heed me, as your mentor, and your professor, and the woman who has had the delight of seeing you mature into a capable and fine young man. *You do not owe anything to anyone anymore,* Percy Weasley. You do not owe anything to your family, nor to your peers, nor to Harry Potter, nor even to Severus Snape, and certainly not to me.”

“I—I don’t understand what you are saying, Professor,” Percy says uneasily, his neck prickling as he processes the insistent brightness to her eyes. Had—had his *mother* told McGonagall of his secret? Had…had Severus? Did she know that he had travelled through time, or was she just referring to a smaller portion of the greater picture that she had alluded to?

When McGonagall leans forward again, he sees suddenly a hint of the soldier within her that he had seen from Severus, and even from Flitwick, back in the early days when he had told the class solemnly of his experience wielding defensive Charms in the First Wizarding War, and from Dumbledore more than once. He had seen the hint of this same tough steel in his mother, who had protected seven children from war the best she could, and from Tonks, who could wield her wand more capably than most wizards that Percy had ever met, and from Myrtle, who for all her youthful exterior was a soul older than even he.

“I am saying that you have lived your life according to the rules that you set to yourself at eleven, and to a task that you had that was far too great for one individual,” McGonagall says

precisely and deliberately, and Percy feels the impulse to rise and flee well up inside him. He squeezes together his toes, trying to keep his expression carefully blank, but it is difficult to face the raw honesty of his former professor without emotion. What did she *know?* What did others know? It made him feel—exposed, and frightened, and claustrophobic, and desperate —

"Professor—"

And then McGonagall smiles, and Percy feels that his throat no longer feels as tight, and he is able to breathe again at the warm understanding in her eyes. "You have a third life left to live," she says gently, and he bites his lip fiercely. So she knew, whether his mother had told her or Severus, and she too is not fleeing at the sight of him, nor clamouring to have him locked away for his sins. "And I sense you do not know what you wish to do with it, and I admit I hope that you return to Hogwarts. But you must do what you feel will make *you* happy, Percy. That is the greatest bravery I can ask of you, to make a choice for your own happiness and have conviction in it."

Percy's voice hitches when he asks, "But what if I choose wrong?"

"Then you choose again, and you choose differently." McGonagall looks out the window too, and he follows her gaze, and they together in silence watch the straight lines of Severus' body as he paces back and forth, muttering to himself as he works out something complex in his mind. "It will be the hardest thing you have done, but you must learn to trust yourself, and to forgive yourself for your mistakes, if you are to move past this, Percy."

For a very long time, they are silent, and Percy finds his attention caught on Severus. Severus is rushing through his spells; Percy can see his haste in the swift, abrupt lines of his wand-work, and he has the sudden thought that perhaps Severus is hurrying so that he may return home before Percy, so that he can be perfectly composed by the fireplace to hear what Percy has to say.

But Percy *still* does not know what to say. He feels caught between these options, the great old grandeur of Hogwarts, and everything it has represented for him, in all of the realms his soul has lived—and the quiet domestic solitude of Severus' house, which has felt more like a home than anywhere else he had ever lived, at least in this lifetime.

How can he explain to anyone that where the idea of returning to Severus' house makes him feel understandably small and confined and in a strange way disappointed with himself, the idea of returning to Hogwarts makes him inexplicably feel the very same way?

A glint in the window catches his eye, and Percy watches as a droplet from an overhead pipe catches on the ridge of the window and rolls down the pane before the magic catches it and fizzles it away. Perhaps Myrtle would understand that Percy cannot help but neither of these options feel like a life at all, or at least a life where he would be—happy. He cannot recall the last time that he was truly happy. He had never been happy with Tom, at least not without the corresponding anxiety seizing the outline of his heart. He had never been happy at Hogwarts, at least not for more than a few minutes at a time, not without the burden of the upcoming war in the back of his mind at all times. And he certainly had never been happy at the

Burrow, not with that constant tension between him and his family, his sense that something about him does not belong fully.

What does it even *mean* for him to be happy? How would he recognise it when it came? If he could peer into his soul again—Percy clutches at the stone, even as his eyes track Severus as he pauses in his movements and glances up at the castle, as if sensing Percy's attention—would it still be Hogwarts, or the riverbank, or somewhere else entirely? Would it help him understand his happiness, what his soul longs for, the rift that he had torn with his own hands? If he does not know what it feels like to be happy, how can he have conviction in whatever choice he made?

"Is Severus leaving?" McGonagall asks, breaking into Percy's attention, and with a jolt he sees that Severus has stowed his wand and begun to walk across the grounds, but not in the direction of the Great Hall. He is walking toward the large iron gates, which would swing open at his touch and admit him into Hogwarts. "He couldn't have finished the repairs in such a short amount of time."

"He's leaving without me," Percy says, and with a flash he realises that the brittleness he'd sensed from Severus ever since that Halloween night was because Severus had been forcing himself to say goodbye but had not been pleased to do so. It had felt so alien to Percy because Severus *was* fond of him, perhaps even cared for him. Hadn't he said such a thing to Percy, under duress? Severus has been saying goodbye, equipping Percy with the notebook, Galleons, and trunk to begin his apprenticeship not because he wishes for Percy to leave, but because he believes that he is *helping* Percy to do the right thing, the bloody idiot. Percy had never asked for his help, for anything other than quiet peace and support, but Severus never had been able to resist sticking his large nose into areas of Percy's life that did not concern him.

The difference is that now, watching his painfully small figure cross the grounds, Percy thinks for the first time that perhaps Severus interferes in his life because he *cares* for Percy. Perhaps because they are friends.

And this, more than anything else, flares brightly in his breast and induces him to leap to his feet. Percy turns back to McGonagall, who looks the very same as she always has, though more tired, perhaps, and more old, and says urgently, as if the brief moment of clarity that Severus' departing body had brought upon him could disappear at any time, "I don't want *either* of these things, Professor."

McGonagall frowns at him. "What is holding you back, Percy?"

"Absolutely nothing." Percy shakes his head and an incredulous laugh threatens to bubble out of his tight chest. "I can't stay here, Professor, and I can't go back, either." He pauses, expecting another question, but McGonagall has closed her mouth and is watching him quietly. Under her gaze he straightens, feeling for the first time in her office like he is not merely eleven, and that he perhaps could one day be her equal. With a shy yet defiant shrug, he continues, "I've never lived past this point, not in either t-timeline, and I have no idea what it is that I want—but I know what I *don't* want."

"And that is?" Professor McGonagall asks archly, raising an eyebrow.

“To die as if I’ve never lived,” says Percy, and he thinks of Myrtle, of her smile, of her persistence in growing and changing, even after death. It gives him the strength to admit, “Professor, I feel nervous to say no to you—but by the same token, I do not feel *afraid."*

“Good,” says McGonagall fiercely, standing as well, her tea and cookies left uneaten. “You deserve to say no to things, Percy.”

“I want a new arena entirely,” he says, shaking his head, and the minute that the words leave his mouth, he realises that they are true. To return to Hogwarts a third time, to live his life again as if he could rewrite it for a third time—to waste away the rest of his life afraid to even read a book, hesitant to wake before dawn and greet the world as he had with Auntie Muriel in the summer solstice—

I wish to be free, he thinks to himself, and something inside him burns at the thought.

And then without another thought, he’s running, as if he were once again a lynx, his four paws bounding while his heart strains in primordial joy.

He skids down the five flights of stairs from McGonagall’s office to the Great Hall, the stairs swinging swiftly and creakily to meet him so that he need not break his stride. He bursts through a crowd of ghosts, who scatter in the sunlight like spray at the banks of a stream, and leaves them behind to their affronted muttering as he turns the corner and runs out into the courtyard. After so many months of inactivity, his chest burns with the effort, but he forces himself to continue, albeit at a slower pace, feeling acutely that if Severus walks out of Hogwarts without him today, some spell between them will be broken, and Percy will never be able to say the things that are sprouting in his chest.

Down across the grounds, with Hagrid’s hut to the left, a hippogriff in his garden lifting its head curiously as Percy passes. Down past the Whomping Willow, to skid right onto the small path that Severus had taken. Across past the Forbidden Forest, the tall hoops of the Quidditch pitch just visible across the grounds, up past the hill where Percy had fainted in his first year from trying to summon boulders.

And then the gates of Hogwarts are in sight, and Percy puts on a final burst of speed, his heart beating and straining out of his chest, and he thinks to himself exultantly *there,* like he is his lynx, and he has scented his target, and his world has narrowed to only his goal—

—and he nearly barrels into Severus, who turns with a spell already on his lips, thick ropes that bind Percy and throw him to the ground.

“What in Merlin’s name are you *doing?”* Severus roars at him, looming over him angrily. “Is there some sort of emergency that required you to tackle me like a bloody rugby player?”

Painfully emmershed in the robes, Percy blinks owlishly at Severus from the ground and chokes out, “Rugby player?”

“A Muggle sport,” explains Severus with a glower. He looks for a second as if he might consider leaving Percy trussed up like a Christmas turkey on the wet grass but then releases

Percy reluctantly and watches dispassionately as Percy pushes himself up to his feet. Massaging his arms, Percy scowls at Severus. He hates that bloody spell.

“You were leaving,” Percy explains shortly, all of his thrilled joy leaving his body as Severus regards him, unimpressed. When Severus does not speak, Percy continues, his cheeks beginning to flood with hot, heavy blood, “Without me.”

Severus raises an eyebrow. “I can send you your things.”

“I’m not—I’m not *staying,* Severus.” Percy briefly squeezes his eyes together in frustration, needing a second to take stock of his body, and the sweat lining his brow and gathering between his armpits, and the tired stutter of his heart. It had felt *good* to run, though Percy had never been one for exercise, to tear across the grounds without any thought beyond reaching Severus as quickly as possible.

“You are not happy, in my house.”

Percy wipes the back of his sleeve against his forehead, feeling that uncomfortable mix of being hot on a cold day, one reason he had preferred to stay inside during the draughty winter months of Scotland. “I’m not,” he agrees simply, and because he is watching for it, he catches the surprised flinch before Severus blinks away the expression. (Percy would like to think through why it is that everyone expects him to react so *emotionally*, all the time, but he is afraid that if he does start thinking through that question, he will come to some disappointing truths). “But you’re not either, Severus.”

“Do not presume to know my happiness—”

“I may not know your happiness, but I do know you, *Severus*,” Percy says firmly, and he has the satisfying experience of seeing Severus’ jaw snap shut. “You are no happier in your house than I am.”

Severus nearly bares his teeth as he hisses, “I am content with how my life is proceeding.”

“Are you?” Percy mimics Severus’ expression from earlier, raising a mocking eyebrow. “You said that you came to Hogwarts expecting it to be the last time. You were ready to die, Severus, all the same as I was.”

“And yet here I am, alive.”

Percy gives Severus his best Lucius-smile, his teeth pressed together, glinting brightly in the sun. “And I were to leave you, could you tell me in good faith that you will continue to be, after you realise again how utterly miserable you are?” That Severus draws his wand on Percy should not have come as a surprise to Percy, and he adjusts to the new threat easily, though he of course could not parry Severus’ spells should he choose to deploy them. What does come as a surprise to Percy is the raw anger in Severus’ dark, unfathomable eyes. Percy presses forward, sensing instinctively that perhaps in Severus’ shock, he will be able to listen to Percy’s words more clearly. “You did not live in that decade between the first war and the second. Take it from me, Severus; I know what it looks like when someone is merely going through the motions because they feel they have no other option.”

“And in the war? You claim I was *living*, as Albus’ murderer and Hogwarts’ most hated professor?”

Percy shrugs, his eyes coolly holding Severus’ gaze. “You were not happy, but I would guess that at least you had a purpose, which helped.”

“You dare lecture me on topics of which you know nothing—”

“—do I know nothing, Severus?” Percy asks challengingly, and Severus falls silent, his chest heaving, and his fingers tight around his wand. “You may lie to everyone else, but I would thank you not to lie to me. I think we owe each other that much, don’t we?”

The wind whistles wetly around them, and Percy pulls his robes tighter around his body, the patches on his robes where he had fallen damp and uncomfortable. Severus flicks his wand, and Percy tenses, but he had cast only a drying and a warming spell, and Percy nods his head in thanks.

“Say what it is that you wish to say, and then leave me be,” says Severus finally, his voice flat and hard. It is a striking difference from the rich, knowing tones that Percy associates most closely with his old professor, and Percy finds his face softening as he turns it toward the other man.

“I want to leave Britain.” The thought had formed high in the confines of Gryffindor tower and strengthened during his run to the Hogwarts gate, so that it now emerges confidently from his mouth. “I want to go to France and pay my respects to Landon in the place where he gave his life for the war. And then I want to go somewhere *else*.” Percy shrugs helplessly, thinking of the mischievous glint in Myrtle’s eyes. “I want to eat proper French food that we didn’t muddle through making ourselves. I want to drink some wine, and see if I like it more when it’s made by the Muggles. I want to go to a library and *not* research Dark magic. I want to see the pyramids again, or the dragons in Romania, or—or something else entirely. I do not even know what I want to see because I do not know anything about the world other than this.”

“You wish...to leave,” Severus says, dubiously, and Percy nods, an incredulous laugh bubbling out of his throat.

“Why not? What is keeping us here, Severus?” Percy gestures to the familiar grounds of the castle and the tall, graceful towers, gleaming in the afternoon light. “Hogwarts isn’t going anywhere, and neither of us belong here anyway. You can leave your house for a year and nobody is going to claim it as theirs. Nobody needs anything from us.”

Severus stares at Percy, as if he were speaking a foreign language. “You wish to spend your freedom to *travel?”* The admonishment that such a thing would be far too frivolous to justify goes unsaid, but not unheard.

“Yes,” Percy affirms, still with that strange effervescent feeling of wanting to laugh, that childish giddiness that he has not felt in many years. “Who cares what we do anymore, Severus? So I lost my magic; so I have half a soul; so you must grapple with what you did to help us win the war. We can do those things as easily in another country.”

Severus takes a step forward and says gravely, “But we must pay our repentance, Percy, for the sins we committed—”

“Haven’t we already?” Percy insists pleadingly, and Severus falls silent, staring at Percy with bewildered puzzlement. In a softer tone, feeling some of the giddiness leave his system, Percy continues, “I’ve *lost my magic*, Severus. You’ve lost all of your friends, and those you loved, and your job as a professor. Neither of us belong here anymore.”

“You may go, Percy, if you feel this is what you need to heal,” says Severus with an air of finality. “But I cannot abandon my own repentance so easily.”

“It is our choices that determine our impact on the world, Severus,” Percy says desperately as Severus turns to go. “Isn’t that what you and I have both learned? Our intentions do not matter; our knowledge does not matter; our lives do not matter, not unless we *do* something with them. It won’t help a single person if you spend the rest of your life in that house. It certainly won’t help me.”

Severus stills and pivots slowly on his feet, so that he swings around to face Percy once more. Percy squashes the brief flicker of triumph as Severus searches for something in his face, feeling a tangible shock as their eyes meet again.

“I am not saying that I want to leave because I want to run away,” Percy says with a rueful smile. “I have not been unhappy living with you, though I know you believe otherwise. But I do believe that to do nothing with our lives is not honouring those who gave their lives for us.”

As Percy says it out loud, he realises that *this* is what has been bothering him, even on the days where he feels content, nestled softly in the solitude of Severus’ home, cut off from the rest of the world. Myrtle would not be proud to know that he is spending the precious currency of his remaining lives on hiding away from the world. Landon would not respect Percy’s lack of ambition, nor would Lucius. Tom would not recognise this version of Percy, and while Percy does not know if he wants to claim all of the versions of himself that Tom brought into being, he can admit to himself now that he does not want to disown all of them, either.

And the version of Percy who twisted himself through time to right his wrongs, as arrogant and hot-headed and foolish as he had been, would not recognise himself either. That version of Percy was willing to take on an immortal Dark Lord with nothing more than his half-baked guesses to the future, and while Percy has castigated himself a million times for his idiocy, he had never before today recognised the bravery that had underlied his actions too. Wasn’t it the most Gryffindor trait to combine bravery with idiocy, to leap without looking, to do the right thing, answers be damned?

Percy had, in another life, lived his life so rigidly according to the rules he perceived in the society around him that he had lost himself to the thrall. He had ended that life for the gift to start again, and he had succeeded, in a way, despite it all. The last eleven years had not gone as smoothly as he would have hoped, and he thinks he will never be able to answer the question of whether he could have done it better, had he known more of what he knew now.

Bereft of the ability to travel through time again, Percy has no choice but to accept the cards in the order that they fell.

The old Percy had turned against the Dark Lord at the very last minute, had fought in the Battle of Hogwarts fully intending to die, and caused his brother to die as a result of his inaction. *Never again,* Percy had promised fiercely to himself, but he had been betraying that version of him and that version of Fred and everyone else he had left behind in that world by allowing himself to fall into the same sullen patterns, and Percy is so tired of betraying the people who care for him.

"I don't want to live my life in apology," he says into the silence, shaking his head. "Or mired in guilt. I've done that for two lifetimes, Severus, and so have you. We cannot make the same mistakes, not if we want to live our lives with honour. Tom—he never left the past behind. His soul never moved past the hurt that he felt as a boy, and we both saw the damage he wreaked on the world in his anger and his sorrow. He was never free from it, Severus, and if we are not careful, we will follow down the same path."

Severus is silent for many heartbeats, his dark eyes roving over every speck of Percy's face. Percy feels his attention crawling over his skin like ants, but he forces himself to bear it silently, sensing that to look away would be to lose Severus' trust entirely.

Severus allows the silence to drag on just long enough for Percy to begin to wilt, feeling that he had overstepped with no hope of walking his words back. Then he says, sharply but not unkindly, "You would make a shoddy Dark Lord," and Percy laughs in relief.

"I would," he agrees, and then surprising them both, he sticks out his hand for a handshake, the Muggle way. "Come with me, Severus."

"Why?" Severus asks, not moving to take Percy's hand, but not disdaining it either. In the question, Percy hears all of the insecurities that had underpinned his time at Hogwarts, cowering in Myrtle's bathroom, and the pain that howled in Tom's soul, and the edge that never fully left Severus' tone, even in the privacy of his own home.

"Because I care for you, you incomparable idiot," Percy quotes with a small smile, and he is rewarded by an actual snort of amusement from Severus, perhaps only the second or third he has ever received. "And because I would go mad with boredom if I went myself."

"You will find that I am not a pleasant travelling companion," Severus warns.

"Oh, neither am I," says Percy blithely. "I expect we'll hate each other by the end of the first day, but that's got to be better than hating each other at home, isn't it?"

"Only time will tell, I suppose," Severus says with a long-suffering sigh, and then to Percy's great surprise, he reaches out to grasp Percy's hand. "You are sure that you wish to turn your back on this? On Hogwarts?"

"Perhaps not forever," Percy admits over the shock of Severus' hand in his, strangely warm, despite the cool air nipping at their heels. "But if I do return to Hogwarts, it will be because I want to, not because I have to, or I feel I have no other option."

“Only you would make selfishness sound admirable,” grumbles Severus, but before Percy can take offence, Severus shakes his hand and then releases it, as binding as any of the other vows that Percy had made.

As Severus and Percy turn toward the gates and begin walking toward Hogsmeade, Percy feels a feeling begin to grow within his breast, at first smouldering within his body, and then spreading throughout his veins, thrumming in time with his heartbeat. At first, he mistakes it for his magic, but of course he cannot change his circumstance so easily.

It is not happiness, at least, not yet. There is much that he feels must occur, before he will feel the elusive happiness that he dimly remembers from an earlier time settling around his shoulders like a warm cloak. Perhaps there will first be Bill’s wedding, with Severus as Percy’s unexpected guest, or Ron and Ginny’s graduation from Hogwarts. Perhaps they will go to France and Percy will suffer through Severus’ knowing lectures on the quality of fine wines, or even further afield to lands that even Tom never visited, and they will have to navigate the confusing logistics of Muggle transportation and lodging. First, they must argue with each other, and learn to travel together, and discover new sights, and build toward a new friendship. Or perhaps they will hate travelling and feel the stirrings of homesickness calling them home. Percy cannot say, but he feels that they have more than a brief walk to Hogsmeade before he would write to McGonagall—perhaps by then he will begin to call her *Minerva*, as Severus does—and tell her that he has found happiness.

It is not contentment, either, or at least it is not the type of contentment that has at times made Severus’ house feel like a home. As Percy walks with Severus through Hogsmeade and sees the village, as gleaming and pretty and comfortable as it looked during his first return trip in this new lifetime, Percy feels the warmth of that contentment curl up and purr on his shoulder, as if to prompt him to move beyond it.

“Shall we?” Severus asks at the Apparation point, turning to face Percy and extending his arm for the Apparation. Part of Percy wants to turn and look back at Hogwarts, to see once again the castle and its grounds and the great lakes, the leafy boughs of the Forbidden Forest and the gleaming frost-covered snapdragons, and think of Myrtle and Penny and Landon and Tom, but a greater part of him has been taken over by this strange new feeling flooding his body, and so he looks only at Severus and smiles.

“Let’s go,” Percy says, and as Severus whisks them away, he thinks dizzily to himself that perhaps what he is feeling is hope, or something akin to it, hope that in this third life Percy will finally find the answers to some of the questions that plagued him through his first two attempts; hope that he will once again feel strong and powerful, even without his magic, even with his half-healed soul that he may never walk physically through again; hope that he will learn to live with honour, that he will become a man that he would be proud to know, that he will learn to choose and have conviction in his choices, and that he will be free in a way that he never could have imagined for himself.

First steps first, and then the second, Percy thinks to himself, and unbidden, a smile curls the corner of his lips, and his eyes glint behind his glasses as the idea fills him once again with excitement. He had wished to be free for a long time, free from the burdens of his hindsight and the pain of his choices, and that freedom now feels within reach, blazing in the palms of

his hands, a power thrumming throughout his veins, waiting for him to step forward and claim it, and as he leaves Hogwarts behind him, he takes the first step toward the rest of his life, that strange, unlived future, that endless sea of possibility, and deep inside him, something flickers into existence and begins to burn steadily.

Fin.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, thank you, thank you to everyone who read this story, reviewed it, cheered me on, cried and laughed and wished Percy forward, and gave me the support I needed to finish it! I have no idea how I produced so many words, but I honestly could not have done it without those of you who left me comments and motivated me to move forward.

I can never say anything without saying a lot, so I am posting a longer Author's Note / FAQ as the last chapter. The summary is that I have become very keen on the idea of a sequel in the last few weeks as I thought through what to include on this last chapter, but I definitely will need some time to formulate a plot and draft out the majority of it before I try to post anything. Please keep the ideas coming for things you'd like to see, if you are interested in reading any future stories from me.

To all of you who were here since the beginning—it has been a long journey, and I appreciate each of you more than you know. I've memorised most of your usernames by now, and seeing your comments pop up in my inbox is always the highlight of my day. To those of you who joined at the end, welcome, and I hope you enjoyed this story!

FAQ

FAQ*

Will update if there are any other questions that I think would be useful to post here for other readers!

What now?

First, I am going to go back through *A Study of Resonance* and edit out a bunch of the spelling mistakes that I have since noticed. Huge thank you to everyone who pointed out errors…I will finally be addressing those comments, in some cases months after noticing them!

Then, I have a lot of ideas for a sequel! The trick will be coming up with something interesting, targeted, and not too long. As you all know by now, I can go off on the longest tangents for no reason at all, and I don't think I have another lengthy story in me quite yet.

My current plan is a sequel centred around Percy and Severus, as they attempt to go on a relaxing holiday abroad, only to get embroiled in a confusing political mess as the Dementors return from their gathering and request Percy's help in breaking their vows. I think this would be an interesting vehicle for Percy to explore some more of the theory behind soul magic without focusing the story entirely on his own healing. Would love to hear all of your thoughts on what would keep you interested in a sequel as I am actively outlining the story out now! I have added this story to a series which I believe will help those of you who are interested in reading it find it? I'll also post an update here I think when I finally upload the sequel.

I still would love to write a Percy-in-Slytherin story (perhaps a Dark!Percy story?) if I get through the sequel and am not tired of Percy, so please keep those ideas coming as well! They are all duly noted.

Why did you write so many words?

Honestly, I have no idea. When I said this story was "complete" almost a year ago, I had written up to *Half Blood Prince* and thought it would be easy to tie off a few plot points and finish the story up. Somewhere along the way, I kept adding scenes and tweaking scenes and I think I added close to 200k words that I hadn't planned for. I would love to hear your thoughts on whether these chapters were too damn long, or whether you enjoyed the long form narrative. My process for writing typically includes me constantly thinking to myself, "why is XYZ like that?" and then having Percy muse on it until he arrives at a logical conclusion, which means that Percy and I both take three times as long as is necessary to say anything at all. The opposite of "show, don't tell," I think, but then again, I studied engineering and not writing so I can't say what the correct thing to do is.

How long did this take you?

I would say about 3 years, start to finish. I spent about 3-4 months writing all of the Hogwarts years with Percy in RAVENCLAW, took a 3-4 mo the break, read it again, hated it, and then rewrote it in about a month without Tom, hated it again, rewrote it AGAIN, added Snape.

Then I could not for the life of me progress this story past Hogwarts, so I took another extended break, and then one day I reread everything and managed to get energy to write the GoF year. That nearly undid me (my least favorite section of the story) but I got through OotP and then inched along through HBP as mostly bullets. That was when I decided to start publishing on AO3.

It then took me a further year to post everything, edit it, and finish off the story. Please believe me when I say I hadn't decided how it was going to end until I was forced to end it. A lot of shower thoughts...

I say this just to encourage people who have left comments to the effect that they can't believe I wrote this in 11 months or they couldn't imagine finishing their stories. I took a lot of breaks where I got bored of my own story, which was generally a sign that something was falling flat. Usually a month or two off and then a gentle reread was enough to get me going again. I also think that repeatedly rereading the earlier chapters is what helped me tie in little details later on and not forget some of the plot points. The other thing that helped was I just told myself firmly that A FIRST DRAFT WAS GOOD ENOUGH and barring that, bullet points were better than nothing. I had confidence that when I revised I would be able to improve on the draft. That got me through some difficult parts! Just my two cents for anyone struggling to get through their stories, I am no expert.

Why was Percy such a dick?

I honestly didn’t intend for Percy to be so unlikeable, nor so morally ambiguous. At the beginning, I included in all of his pretentious little musings about society because I thought they were funny, but somewhere along the way I found it interesting to explore this idea of a pureblooded character who was technically raised according to the Light side. I am a minority in my part of the world, and I have met a lot of people like the Weasleys, who try their hardest to be allies but continue to view people that are different to them with curiosity that can still feel very alienating, which is how I view Arthur’s obsession with Muggle objects. I tried to make Percy's view realistic without being despicable, like when he likens Muggles to animals or admits to Severus that he would think it would be easier to kill a Muggle. I think many people are kind to animals and care for them and find them interesting to study but would also think it was easier to kill an animal than a person. Percy learns the hard way that there were several things wrong with that assumption.

I also found myself very interested in an idea of a Percy who hungers for belonging and beauty and tradition but who also slowly realises that while family isn’t everything, neither is it nothing, and there is power in doing the right thing and acting with integrity. I hope some of that shown through and Percy felt like he grew throughout the story.

What about Tom?

I have become oddly obsessed with the Severus/Percy pairing as well as the Tom/Percy pairing, which I think is the first time anyone has ever had that particularly weird quirk. My

original intention for Percy was to pair him with Tonks, but honestly, it never really felt natural to take that step. The first draft of the story never ever had Tom as a portrait, and then the second draft had Percy hating Tom, but somehow that felt much more shallow to me. I don't think this story really came alive until I started thinking about how similar Tom and Percy (and later, Severus and Percy) really are, and how much more exquisitely painful it would be for Percy to turn away from his path if he loved the one who set him on it. I wanted to parallel Percy and Tom to Harry and Voldemort, the idea being that Harry's task was to save the world and destroy the most evil wizard of their time, and Percy's task was to fight his own private battles. Both were crucial, both were difficult. Both kisses made me blush to write, which is absurd given how tame they were.

I really think I need to return to Percy and Tom to get it out of my system. I'm thinking a proper Chamber of Secrets fic. If anyone writes this (or any other Tom/Percy), PLEASE send it to me and I will read it gleefully.

Will Percy get his magic back?

Percy will never get his magic back, at least not in the wand-waving Hogwarts-wizard way that he had it before. This story demanded a cost, and Percy's magic felt to me the most natural one, more fitting than even his life would have been. To give him his magic back would lessen the impact of his choices, and I wouldn't do that to Percy, not after so much growth.

However, I started interesting myself in the idea of physical, ancient magic, and so I can't promise that Percy will never find a source of magic again. After all, in this world, all souls have some sort of magic, and all people have souls, so logic dictates…

Are you done now? Enough is enough!

Yes, I am! If you would like to hear more about this story, my process for writing, or have any further feedback for me, please let me know via a comment or my Tumblr (same username). Please share any fanart you make or fics you write that you think I would enjoy!

Okay, one last thing.

The reason I wrote this at all was to practise writing…I've always loved to write little poems and short stories, but I've never taken anything other than a literature class in college, so I usually struggle with longer form original works. I thought fanfiction would be a fun way to flex my writing chops, and I was definitely right! You can really see even in this story how my writing progresses as the chapters go by. It's been such a fun journey and I really encourage anyone who is thinking about writing a story to just go for it!

My ask for you, dear readers, is if you feel so inclined, I would love to hear more about what you liked or disliked about this story. Did you feel like Percy was a good character, or was his growth forced? Did you like the plot, or was it too long and complex? Did you enjoy my writing style, or would you have preferred it to be more pointed, or less descriptive, or anything else? What did you enjoy, or what would you have changed? Are there any sections or quotes that, ahem, resonated with you? I'd love to hear from you so that I can keep improving as I keep writing! No pressure to respond, just thought I would ask.

With that, I bid you all adieu! What a ride this has been.

Works inspired by this one

deal, know, dwell nor think. by Yeyn_the_tutle

Beloved by Jackson_Overland_Frost

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!